

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 January 2013

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership: Committee for
Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is a motion on Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. — [Mr Weir.]

Ministerial Statements

EU Fisheries Council: 18-19 December
2012

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement on the outcome of the negotiations that the Fisheries Council held in Brussels on 18 and 19 December, which determined fishing opportunities for 2013. Members will find in the annex to my statement a map of fishing areas, a summary of the main total allowable catches (TACs) and quotas of interest to the local fleet and a provisional summary of the landings made into the County Down ports by the fleet in 2012.

My fellow Fisheries Ministers Richard Benyon, Richard Lochhead and Alun Davies and I, following consultation with our respective industry representatives, agreed that our first order negotiating priorities for the Council would be securing a freeze in the annual effort reductions applied under the cod recovery plan and a mechanism that would allow for a rollover in the North Sea cod TAC; ensuring that fishing opportunities for area VII nephrops were at least maintained at 2012 levels; resisting the proposed cut for Celtic Sea haddock in area VIIb; supporting the realignment of the TACs for areas IV and VI megrim but securing more flexibility in the transitional arrangements; ensuring that the reduction in the haddock TAC for area VI followed the management plan; removing unnecessary obstacles and disincentives to the successful catch quota schemes, such as the prohibition on quota leasing to vessels participating in the scheme, which had been proposed by the Commission; and, in the absence of robust scientific data, Ministers wanted to resist an overly precautionary approach to the so-called data-poor stocks and take them on a case-by-case basis. In developing our priorities, fisheries Ministers applied three core principles: science, by making use of all the available information and scientific advice in setting fishing

opportunities; sustainability, by moving towards maximum sustainable yield by 2015 where possible; and reducing discards, by ensuring that the TAC and effort decisions that we take continue to support the work under way to eliminate discards from our fisheries.

Members may recall that discussions on effort control dominated Council in December 2011. Fisheries Ministers made important commitments to improve the selectivity of their fisheries and to reduce their impact on vulnerable cod stocks. Our negotiating approach then was successful in getting the Commission to accept our interpretation of the way that member states could buy back days at sea if their fleets complied with measures to reduce cod mortality. Those could include technical measures, such as the use of more selective fishing gears, or management measures to avoid fishing in areas where there are concentrations of juvenile cod or places where cod spawning happens.

The cod plan was a key issue on the agenda of the December 2012 Council. Member states, the Commission, its scientific advisers and the fishing industry all recognise that the current cod recovery plan has serious flaws and urgently needs changed, particularly in relation to the automatic year-on-year reductions in effort required under the plan. Those reductions are counterproductive, as they do not support sustainability objectives and threaten the viability of fishing fleets.

Despite the assurances that Ministers were given at Council in 2011, the Commission failed to bring forward a replacement cod plan. It did, however, make proposals for a regulation to amend the plan last September. That amendment covered several elements, such as providing more flexibility to set TACs in data-poor conditions, allowing Council to freeze effort and strengthen measures to address discards. However, because of ongoing difficulties between the European institutions, it had no prospect of being agreed in time for 2013.

Fisheries Ministers from member states that have fishing opportunities in the cod recovery zone, which includes the Irish Sea, the west of Scotland and the North Sea, have pressed hard for reform of the cod plan. Ahead of the Council, the presidency brought forward two proposals: one to be adopted under the normal process of codecision with the European Parliament and another to be agreed by the Council of Ministers.

The regulation that Council considered proposed to amend articles 9 and 12 of the cod recovery plan relating to the fixing of the TACs for cod stocks in the cod recovery zone and of the allowable fishing effort. The task for Council was, therefore, to reach a political agreement on the presidency's proposed amendment to the current cod recovery plan and to approve a letter to be sent to the European Parliament informing it of that agreement.

It was important to get a resolution to the effort problem, and, in the circumstances, the only available remedy was to secure agreement to the presidency proposal. However, it was recognised that that could strain relations in the European Parliament and have implications for the rest of the cod plan package and, more widely, for other legislative proposals subject to codecision, including CFP reform. I had concerns that the matter would occupy a considerable period of time, leaving less time for negotiations on TACs and quotas. In the event, Ministers came to a quick agreement on the presidency proposal, which secured a freeze on fishing effort at the levels agreed in December 2011. That is in the interests of the cod stocks and the viability of our fishing fleets that work in the cod recovery zone.

I now turn to the outcomes for the fish stocks that are of interest to our local fleet. Negotiations on TACs and quotas began on the afternoon of Wednesday 18 December with a series of trilateral talks between member states, the Commission and the presidency. The first compromise proposal was presented on the afternoon of 19 December, and a second compromise at 4.30 am on 20 December. Negotiations were not concluded until nearly 7.00 am. That was an unsatisfactory process, but it was a complex negotiation, and, as with other member states, we were holding out for a better deal.

My number one priority was area VII nephrops or prawns. Members will be aware of the importance of that stock for our local fleet and the fish-processing sector, which is almost totally dependent on it. Preliminary figures for 2012 indicate that our fleet landed in local ports some 7,165 tons of prawns, worth approximately £16.6 million. The Commission's initial proposal had been for a cut of 12%. At the trilateral talks, I argued that the TAC had to take full account of the fishing patterns of member states that have an interest in that stock. Of course, the Commission is fully aware that that has been the practice for many years.

Some months before Council, I supported a rollover in the TAC, which would have meant maintaining fishing opportunities for 2013 at the same level as in 2012. However, further scientific evidence made available by the South's Marine Institute led to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) revising its catch advice in November 2012. These data indicated that nephrops stocks throughout area VII were being fished sustainably and that the sum of the catch advice for the various functional units in area VII was some 6% better than was the position last year.

Members will be aware that my Department, its scientists and the local industry have been working together to introduce more selective gears to ensure that cod catches are less than 1.5% and to achieve a significant reduction in other unwanted catches. It was, therefore, important that I secured improved fishing opportunities for prawns to encourage our local industry to continue the process of continuous improvement in gear selectivity and to help us to achieve the ambition of having as clean a nephrops fishery as possible. The robust scientific advice enabled me to make a strong case for the TAC to increase by a similar 6% for 2013. That objective was achieved, but only at the final plenary session, when the Commission agreed to move from its compromise position of a rollover to an increase of 6%. That increase was fully justified and means that there is a sustainable supply to our local fish-processing businesses, which have sales in excess of £70 million and employ over 550 workers. Also important to our fleet is the nephrops stock in the west of Scotland, where some 2,500 tons are taken by our vessels. The scientific advice published in June indicated that the stock was in good condition, and ICES catch advice was for an increase in the TAC of 18%. That was reflected in the final agreement. This is further good news for our local fishing fleet.

In relation to other Irish Sea stocks, following my statement last year, a number of Members expressed concern about the 10% cut that was imposed on Irish Sea herring. This happened because the Commission regarded the stock as data-poor due to the absence of a full analytical stock assessment. This was a completely arbitrary figure that had no scientific basis. The herring stock was subsequently benchmarked in February 2012, and a full assessment became available. As a result and following agreement with our industry and the South, which has a share of this stock, I secured a deal with the Commission last summer to uplift the 2012 TAC to 5,280 tons and to set the 2013 TAC at 4,993 tons. There were therefore no

discussions at Council last December on the herring TAC.

Where there is good scientific advice and evidence that fishing levels are sustainable, I will argue that the TACs should be maintained or increased as appropriate. However, for some stocks, such as Irish Sea haddock, there is insufficient data for a full analytical assessment, and the Commission's policy is to propose cuts. Fellow fisheries Ministers and I believe that, in such circumstances, it is important to consider all the available data before coming to a decision about fishing opportunities and that it is counterproductive to simply take an arbitrary slice off the TAC, as the Commission seems inclined to do. Throughout the negotiations, we pressed this point about data-poor stocks at trilateral meetings and in written submissions. For Irish Sea haddock, the original 20% proposed reduction was revised to a 5% reduction. Sole and whiting were cut by 36% and 5% respectively, however those stocks are not of economic importance to the local fleet. The TAC for Irish Sea plaice is unchanged. All scientific evidence indicates that Irish Sea cod remains in poor condition, and this stock closed with a 25% reduction in the TAC. However, there is still ongoing correspondence with the Commission about that because the regulation to change the cod plan, which Ministers agreed, should have meant a decrease of 20%.

The Clyde herring quota has still to be decided, and this will fall to Britain and to the North of Ireland under arrangements that allow member states to determine the quota if the entire stock lies within a member state's waters. Area VII monkfish was reduced by 5%, compared with the 20% originally proposed, and the fishing opportunities for hake in area VI and area VII are unchanged. Members can see the impact of these TAC movements in tonnage in the summary that is provided in the annex to my statement.

I appreciate the opportunity to bring Members up to date on the outcome of the 2012 fisheries negotiations, as far as they affect our local fleet. I put on record my thanks to my colleagues Richard Benyon in DEFRA, Richard Lochhead in the Scottish Government, Alun Davies in the Welsh Assembly and Simon Coveney in the South for their strong support throughout the negotiations.

Mr Byrne (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): First, I apologise for the Chairman, who cannot be here; he has an engagement in Ballymena.

I thank the Minister for her statement updating the House on the recent fisheries negotiations. The prawn catch is of vital importance to the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, and the 6% increase is to be welcomed. However, there are some long-term concerns regarding the gear used by the prawn fleet. Will the Minister update us on what is happening in the negotiations about the type of gear that can be used in the future? Scotland managed to get an 18% increase in its allowable catch. Given the scientific data, why did Scotland get such preferential treatment against our 6%? Lastly, what is the current situation regarding the herring quota for Northern Ireland in the UK context?

12.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to update the Member on the highly selective gear and to pick up on the issue of Scotland. All the increases I talked about in the statement came about because of having strong, solid scientific evidence to back up the case. The scientific evidence we have for the area that we fish — area VII — supported a 6% increase. That is how we were able to secure that, which is obviously a very positive opportunity for the local fleet and rewards them for taking positive steps to deal with the discards issue by taking on the highly selective gear.

Last year, I made a commitment to the Commission that our prawn fleet would fish with gears capable of achieving exemption from the cod recovery regime. Exemption requires vessels to use highly selective gears all the time. Although we have yet to gather enough data to exempt the gears we use, we must use the gears all the time to honour the commitment that was made. There will be a new obligation to land all catches that will be included in the reformed common fisheries policy. It is designed to address the problem of discarding fish. Fish are usually discarded because there is no quota, they are below the minimum landing size or there is no market for them. So it is in everybody's interest that we get to a position where we have the cleanest prawn fishery possible. The industry is working hard to make sure that the selective gear being used is the best possible. Trials will continue in the early part of this year, and we continue to work with the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF), the science body in Europe, to make sure that it is content with the selective gear that our industry uses.

The other point was on the herring quota. As I said in the statement, we were able to secure agreement based, again, on solid scientific

evidence during the year and agree the tonnage, so that was not discussed at the December Council. However, the industry was very much involved in the discussions on setting the quota for last year and this year, which happened, I think, around June last year.

Mr Irwin: You said in your statement that the Commission, scientific advisers and the fishing industry all recognise that the current cod recovery plan has serious flaws. Will the Minister assure the House that she will continue to press for a cod recovery plan that is sustainable and ensures the viability of our fishing fleet?

Mrs O'Neill: I can absolutely give that assurance. As I said in the statement, it is widely recognised that the plan has failed, given the fact that it has been in place for quite a number of years and there has been no improvement in stock levels of cod. There is no doubt about it: cod is in a very poor state. We have to take action to remedy that. We need to move to a position where we have more of a mixed fishery, so our local fleet is not dependent on one type of fish. Any changes that are necessary will be achieved through the cod recovery plan. Two regulations are expected to come forward in the early part of the year. CFP negotiations may overtake those, but I will continue to push for improvements in the plan.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she tell us when a long-term management plan for Irish Sea herring will be included?

Mrs O'Neill: For Irish Sea herring, we have the deal struck in the middle of last year on the basis of ICES advice. However, we need to look towards a longer-term management plan in general for all stocks. For herring in particular, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute is working with the industry, and the Pelagic Regional Advisory Council is going to draft a plan. It is hoped that that will be presented to the Commission this year. However, all those management plans are currently being held up by an interinstitutional dispute between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament about who has legislative competence to approve them. I cannot give an estimate of the introduction of the herring plans until that dispute is resolved. As I said, plans are expected to come forward at some stage this year.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome much that she has

said. Given that the industry has welcomed the majority of what the Minister has said and will have greater catching opportunities in 2013, will the Minister give a commitment that, in reviewing the European Fisheries Fund, she will commit to providing additional assistance to an industry that has the potential to expand?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the industry has welcomed the position that we achieved at the December Fisheries Council. It rewards the industry for the hard work it has taken forward in moving towards highly selective gear. It has been a difficult year in that there have been high operating costs for our fishing industry. However, it is getting good prices, so that, in a way, balances it out. We have opportunities under the EFF to ensure that we look after and protect the sustainability of our local fishing communities. We will continue to do that and make sure that the funds are best directed towards those communities. There are groups in place that look at the wider area, and they will continue to do that in the time ahead.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the statement. I sympathise with the Minister and her colleagues, who had to hang around until 4.30 am and then until 7.00 am before they reached agreement.

The Minister said:

"Some months before Council, I supported a rollover in the TAC".

Given the success that the Minister had in coming up with the 6% increase, if there was continuous involvement, even at this moment in time, would the Minister hope that, come next year, you would have an increase of even more than 6% in order to sustain and, indeed, bring back the proud tradition that we have in the fishing industry in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I suppose the obvious answer is that we will continue to strengthen our science. Where we have science to back up our case, we will continue to make that case to the Commission in Europe. The reason why we were able to strongly push and advocate the 6% increase was the new science that we had. As we continue to work in partnership with Simon Coveney in the South and with Scotland, Wales and England, there is a lot more potential to be explored for our local industry. An increase of 6% makes a lot of difference to the local industry. Every year that we go out there we will go out with the intention of getting the very best deal for the local industry.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her statement. There were references to poor data. Is the Minister not concerned that the Commission is making unfair and unbalanced decisions based on poor data? Whose responsibility is it to make sure that the data is correct, and what confidence does she have that it will be correct in the future?

Mrs O'Neill: The Commission makes all its decisions firmly on the basis of the scientific evidence. We have very strong evidence and continually argue that point with the Commission. AFBI and our science people here do great work and have come up with sound scientific arguments to support our case when we go out to Brussels. However, we get into a debate about the science when we meet the science experts from Brussels, and that is what they rely on. Our job is to make sure that we impress on them how effective our science is and that we can stand over the science that we present. We will continue to do that. We will probably always have that battle between local science and the Brussels-based STECF. We will continue to have that battle, but, if we are able to stand over the evidence that we produce, that puts us in a strong position.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement and the outcome of the 2012 fishing negotiations, bearing in mind that 95% of our fishing fleet fishes for prawns and was faced with the threat of a proposed cut of some 12% in the quota. The successful negotiation of a 6% increase comes as a massive boost to our fishing industry. Will the Minister outline whether there are likely to be any further proposals for the management of nephrops next year?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I suppose the Commission may again propose spatial management arrangements for the nephrops stock. It had intended to do so last year, because it made a commitment to do so in the 2012 TAC and quota regulation, but that work had to be set aside due to other priorities. We need to look carefully at any proposals that emerge, because the arrangements brought forward in 2010 were totally unacceptable in a number of respects. We will of course have to consult our local industry, make sure that we take on board all the formal views of that industry and then respond to the Commission. We will see how it develops from there.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. It appears that the cod recovery

plan has been fraught with various difficulties from other member states and various stakeholders. I note that the Minister said:

"the only available remedy was to secure agreement to the presidency proposal."

Can the Minister elaborate a little more on the implications that that agreement may have for the rest of the cod recovery plan?

Mrs O'Neill: While recognising that the plan was completely flawed and given the fact that we are still sitting in a data-poor situation for cod, it is very evident to us that there is a lot of unexplained mortality when it comes to cod. I do not think that the Commission has even got to the bottom of why that is and come up with any robust arguments. The two proposed changes that were to come forward came too late. They will certainly improve the situation, although they will not sort everything out, but the two regulations that came forward came too late in terms of codecision-making in Europe, getting it through the Parliament and getting it through the Commission. So, we hope that something will come forward in the early part of this year. However, as I said, the CFP negotiations will maybe take precedence over that. We will continue to push for changes to the cod recovery plan and monitor the situation as the Commission comes forward with additional regulations and proposals. The plan simply does not work at the moment.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. She said several times that changes needed to be made. Following the Prime Minister's recent welcome announcement that he is to seek a renegotiation of powers between the UK and Brussels, does the Minister agree that the deeply flawed CFP needs to be significantly improved or dropped and replaced with something new?

Mrs O'Neill: I am glad to see that the UUP is on board with the DUP position that was put forward by Diane Dodds before December. Any such decision would have to be taken at member state level, so there would have to be a lot of consultation. There will be strong arguments for and against pulling out of the CFP, and the Member will be aware of those. I am sure that he has heard that from the industry. However, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to withdraw from the CFP without withdrawing from the entire EU. That would be unwise, given the large amount of funding — £300 million — put into the agricultural community. I do not know whether the Member is advocating that that should be the case and

we should withdraw that support from farmers. We need to be very careful about that. The decision will be taken after a lot of consultation, but it will be taken at member state level.

Mr McAleer: What proportion of Irish Sea fish stocks is being fished sustainably? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs O'Neill: We are always trying to move to a position where all our stocks, because they are all at different levels, are fished at the maximum sustainable level. That means that, where stocks are fished, enough are left to support the industry in the future.

The state of each stock varies, but the stocks that are most important to our fleet, particularly prawns and Irish Sea herring, are fished at sustainable levels. Other stocks, such as cod and whiting, are still below the required levels, and continued action needs to be taken to reduce the fish mortality of those stocks to the lowest possible level.

The Irish Sea cod stock remains below precautionary limits. Fishing mortality is uncertain, and total mortality remains very high. As I said, the cod recovery plan that is in operation provides for an annual decrease in the TAC, but a range of cod conservation measures need to be taken until the stock recovers.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the increase in the prawn quota, which is good news for Kilkeel, Portavogie and Ardglass, but I would still express caution about the sustainable supply for the fish processors; they need more fish.

The Minister has said "data-poor" quite a lot when talking about the analysis. What cognisance is taken of the fishing industry, particularly the fishermen who have spent their life out at sea, when it comes to the determination of the likes of cod stocks?

Mrs O'Neill: There has always been a difference between what the science says and what the fishermen feel. There will always be that battle. All fishermen recognise that cod stocks are in a poor state. They, perhaps, do not support the view that it is in as poor a state as the science suggests. I will continue to work with the industry. We have a sentinel fishery in place — a scientific fishery, really — in which the fishermen were involved. They came back and gave me the science and the figures that they had gathered. We will continue to work with the fishing industry because I believe in

taking its views on board. Those are the people who are out exploring all the fishing opportunities day and daily. It is about getting a balance. It is about taking on board what the fishermen are saying and listening to the science as well. We will continue to do that. We have some more plans for this year to further explore the sentinel fishery, and I will be happy to update the House when more results are available.

Mr Wells: The Minister indicated her dissatisfaction with the way in which fisheries policies are determined in Brussels. She tells us about 7.00 am deadlines and boiler house-type atmospheres. What are she and her fellow UK Ministers doing to stop this ridiculous way of determining the livelihoods of fishermen in County Down? There must be a better way than spending the week leading up to Christmas in that type of atmosphere, where mistakes are bound to be made.

Mrs O'Neill: I agree totally with the Member. Last year, I called it the "December dance". It is ridiculous to be sitting, year on year, determining the following year's quotas for the fishing industry. It is particularly difficult for the industry, as it cannot plan beyond that year because it does not know what the quotas will be. My colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales, Simon Coveney in the South and I continually make the same argument.

We hoped that it would be addressed under the CFP, but unfortunately that was not the case. We are arguing very strongly for regionalisation under the CFP, which I believe will give us a bit more control in setting the future priorities for our industry.

12.30 pm

We continue to lobby the Commission, and we make the arguments very strongly. It is the Commission that decides when we have the negotiation. Unfortunately, we have to be out there and involved in the discussions the whole week before Christmas. It goes down to the wall, but I assure the Member and the industry that we are very alert, regardless of whether it is 7.00 am and we have been negotiating all night. We are very alert to the facts and the figures. We are making sure that our industry's needs are well-reflected and that we get the best possible deal.

Mr Allister: I will ask the Minister to explain one specific of her statement. If I understand it correctly, she indicates that the presidency proposal on the cod plan, which we are told

was agreed, would have resulted in capping any reduction in cod at 20%, yet the outworking is a 25% reduction. Will she explain how she squares that circle and how those two things sit together? Does she look forward to the day when the people of this United Kingdom decide, in an in-out referendum, that they are better off out of the EU and that we should set our own fishing policy according to our own needs and not according to Brussels diktat?

Mrs O'Neill: The Commission's original proposal was for a cut of 25%, as I said in the statement. That was on the basis of the original cod plan. However, representations were then made to the Commission during the Council to point out that the cut should be reduced to 20% in keeping with the amendment made to article 9 of the plan, which Ministers had agreed on the day of the Council. Despite this being raised on two occasions at the final plenary session, the Commission absolutely refused to move on it. Officials have also been in communication with the Commission post-Council.

We await the outcome of that process. We dispute the fact that it was 25% as opposed to 20%. If that proves successful, an in-year amendment will be made to the TAC and quota regulations. We hope that we will be able to get that changed. We were not the only people who were sitting with that understanding, so we expect that it will be changed.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

The Member can have his own personal view about the CFP and pulling out of the EU. I raised the issue with Robin Swann earlier. It is not a decision that should be taken lightly because of the impact that it will have on local agriculture and the wider rural community and the fishing community. The Member may be advocating pulling out, but, personally, I would not want to be in the position of doing that because of the loss that there would be to the local industry: £300 million to the agriculture community and £500 million to the rural development programme. Those are opportunities that are very much favoured and welcomed by local people. The Member can explain that to the electorate.

Mr McNarry: Is the Minister aware of the current Sainsbury's promotion of alternative tasty fish, partly to introduce new fish to the public and partly to help with the preservation of popular fish stocks? If she is, will she consider adding to that supermarket initiative by

recommending fish alternatives to help the industry as a whole?

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware of it. On Friday, I attended Sainsbury's to help launch that promotion. It is all about encouraging people to look at eating alternative fish, as opposed to the cod and salmon that people traditionally buy. It is about encouraging people to look at mussels, herring, mackerel and other types of fish. It is a fantastic project that Sainsbury's is taking forward. I hope that it helps people to explore other fish. Sainsbury's is giving out free samples, so I encourage people to avail themselves of those when they can.

North/South Ministerial Council:
Aquaculture and Marine

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): A Cheann Comhairle, I begin by sending my deepest condolences to the family of Thomas Sloan, who died last week. Thomas was from Kilkeel, and he was our party's representative on the Loughs Agency board. He was a long-standing party member and an active member of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission board's aquaculture and shell fishery subcommittee. He will be sadly missed by his wife Eileen and stepchildren Brian and Bronagh. I extend my sympathies to the family.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with Section 52 of the 1998 Act regarding the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Wednesday 12 December 2012. The Executive were represented by Nelson McCausland and myself. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Pat Rabbitte TD. The statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

Minister Rabbitte informed the council that they are hosting the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization's (NASCO) annual meeting in Drogheda in June 2013. NASCO is an international organisation that was established by an intergovernmental convention in 1984. The objective of NASCO is to conserve, restore, enhance and rationally manage Atlantic salmon through international co-operation, taking account of the best available scientific information. Ministers and colleagues from the sectoral area will be invited to participate.

We noted that the Loughs Agency CEO, Derick Anderson, is unwell and so approved the appointment of John Pollock as acting CEO. We sent our best wishes to Derick for a speedy recovery.

Liz Ashton of Queen's University gave a presentation on the Loughs Agency-led IBIS project, which is researching the native oyster fishery in Lough Foyle. Jennifer Dodd of Glasgow University then gave a presentation on the impact of river barriers on the migration of Atlantic salmon through the Foyle catchment. We noted the valuable contribution those research projects will make to the management

and development of those important fisheries and as reference work for application elsewhere. We also noted the potential for an event, such as a Foyle oyster festival, following on, perhaps, from the legacy of Derry City of Culture 2013.

We received a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency from its chairperson, Winston Patterson, and the acting chief executive, John Pollock. We welcomed the reduction in violent incidents against Loughs Agency fishery protection staff, with no significant issues occurring since the last meeting. Recent custodial sentences for two offenders were also noted. We noted the agency's engagement with the Lough Foyle native oyster fishermen, including a meeting to present the IBIS project on the native oyster fishery and to discuss restoration works and ongoing trials.

We welcomed the agency's work with the City of Culture offices, with a view to incorporating the River Foyle into the festivities planned for 2013. We also noted the latest position on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments and the agency's ongoing conservation and protection efforts.

We noted that the Loughs Agency has prepared a draft business plan for 2013, pending receipt of further guidance from the Finance Departments. We noted the finalisation of an economic appraisal of the options to regularise pay and pension arrangements in the Loughs Agency and the recommendation that the agency takes the necessary steps to join the North/South pension scheme. Legal and financial implications are being considered by sponsor and Finance Departments in the context of the wider review and the reform of public sector pensions, North and South. Recommendations will be brought to a future NSMC aquaculture and marine meeting for approval.

We approved two sets of regulations: the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Angling) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 and the subsequent Foyle Area (Control of Fishing) (Amendment) Regulations 2012. Those amendments are a response to requests from angling stakeholders to facilitate angling methods where catch-and-release applies to salmon fishing and in Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) waters in the Loughs Agency's jurisdiction.

We welcomed progress by the agency in developing an aquaculture management agreement with the Department of Agriculture,

Food and the Marine. We noted in particular the aim to have an overarching operational agreement between the agency and other agencies with technical responsibilities that relate to aquaculture licensing in the Foyle and Carlingford areas that are in place during 2013 to enable aquaculture licensing by the Loughs Agency in Lough Foyle to progress.

We approved the appointment of Laurence Arbuckle to the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. Mr Arbuckle succeeds Tarlach O Crosain, and we expressed our appreciation to Mr O Crosain for his significant contribution to the board. That appreciation has since been provided in writing to Tarlach on behalf of Ministers by our joint secretariat.

Finally, we agreed to meet again in aquaculture and marine format in March 2013. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Byrne (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development):

I welcome the Minister's statement, but I have to say that I am disappointed by its lack of content and detail. That does not do the North/South Ministerial Council's reputation any good when it comes to detail and clarity.

The statement refers to a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency, but there is nothing about what that progress report says. Will the Minister give us the highlights of the report? Like the Minister, I welcome the reduction in the number of violent incidents against Loughs Agency staff and hope that there is no resurgence in the coming fishing season. Will she expand on the recent custodial sentences that she mentioned were given to two offenders?

The Minister told us that the meeting noted:

"the latest position on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments".

Will she update us on whether the position of salmon in the Carlingford and Foyle areas is improving?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There are a number of questions there. On the substance and detail of the statement, I, like the Member, support the inclusion of other areas of work. I want an expansion in the work of the North/South Ministerial Council's bodies. The Member will

be aware that, as a result of the St Andrews discussions, there was to be discussion on how we can expand those groups. I see a lot more potential, not just in this body but in other bodies, for expansion of the work. We look forward to that in the time ahead.

The Member asked about assaults on staff. I am happy to note that there have not been any instances since the last meeting. That can sometimes be because of the time of year. This is not the time of year for salmon fishing and poaching incidents. Since the last meeting took place, the agency has reported seizures for 2012 of 76 fishing rods, 136 nets, 16 boats and two vehicles. It also reported that 75 offenders have been identified and that 50 cases are in preparation. That shows the seriousness of the issue of assaults on staff who are out doing their work, and we look forward to the courts dealing with those cases. Since the July meeting, two men have been convicted of poaching and assaulting fisheries officers, and they received custodial sentences in Letterkenny District Court. Others have received sentences ranging from fines to community service.

The meeting received a general update on the work of the Loughs Agency, but I am very happy to provide the agency's report to the Member. It was just about the general operational issues of the Loughs Agency, particularly the attacks on staff, work on the IBIS project and all the other marine tourism strategy work that is being taken forward.

Mr Irwin: The Minister's statement touches on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas. Will she elaborate on that? I agree with the Deputy Chair of the Committee that some of the information is quite vague.

Mrs O'Neill: It is not for me to speak for the other Member, but I think that he meant that there was a much greater remit to expand the work of North/South bodies. I am glad that the DUP is on board with that one.

I think that the Member is asking, given the low salmon counts in rivers in the Foyle area in recent years despite the suspension of commercial fisheries, what action the agency has taken to protect salmon. It has taken a number of measures on angling to maximise the conservation of salmon stocks, including three catch-and-release declarations under the Foyle area regulations 2010.

The agency has also undertaken extensive consultation with the fishery owners, angling

clubs and associations and other interests to, in all cases, encourage them to maximise the conservation of fish that do not make it back into the rivers. The initial issue of carcass tags to anglers has been restricted to one blue and five black. Blue carcass tags are issued between January and the end of May each year for the spring salmon run, and black carcass tags are issued from June to the end of the season for the summer grilse.

A topic being considered under the IBIS project is salmon migration in the Foyle. The agency hopes that that will help to inform salmon fishery management and ensure that fishing opportunities are consistent with achieving the objectives of the water framework, the habitats directive and the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization principles.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give us some information on the new interim CEO?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. The Loughs Agency CEO, Derick Anderson, has advised the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission that he is likely to be on sick leave for the foreseeable future. To ensure the continued effective operation of the agency, the board invited applicants from within the Loughs Agency directorships to temporarily fill the position. John Pollock was successful in his application to the board subject to the approval of the NSMC, which proposed his appointment as acting CEO until Mr Anderson returns from sick leave. We did that at the meeting, and John Pollock is now in place. In line with the Loughs Agency's financial memorandum, we needed to have someone in place.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for her statement. I note that the Loughs Agency has prepared a draft business plan ahead of receiving guidance from the Finance Departments. Does the Minister endorse the agency's approach of creating a costed business plan ahead of making important decisions?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in the statement, we await approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and I am not in a position, even at this stage, to provide a timeline for when that will happen. The Loughs Agency has prepared a draft business plan for 2013, but it cannot be finalised until the 2013 business plan and budget guidance have been issued by the two Finance Departments. I am

led to believe that that will happen within the next two weeks.

12.45 pm

However, I assure the Member that the Loughs Agency is accountable to the NSMC. Its financial management appears to be prudent, and it regularly gives us updates at the meetings and discusses its plans for the time ahead. As sponsor Departments, we have our role to play in the scrutiny of that work, and we will continue to do that. So, I do not think that there is any issue with the planning or with the financial decisions that are being taken.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. She said that the agency has been working with the City of Culture office in Derry to incorporate the River Foyle. We know of the excellent contribution that the City of Culture started off with last week through the 'Sons and Daughters' event. Can the Minister give any indication of what is being or has been planned for the River Foyle in the continuation of the 2013 City of Culture year?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. The agency has been liaising with the City of Culture offices on the events that have been planned for this year, and we are very keen to ensure that the River Foyle is included in all the festivities. By talking to stakeholders and the interested groups, the Loughs Agency is looking at innovative ways in which we can do that. The agency wants to encourage use of the river and intends to provide support for a series of maritime tourism and angling events that will coincide with and complement the City of Culture events plan. That will be facilitated through our sustainable development funding programme for 2013.

As I mentioned, we had discussion at the meeting about the potential for an event that is linked to the Loughs Agency's work with local fisherman. There is a lot of scope for and potential in some sort of oyster festival, which could become a regular event. If that were successful, I think that it would be very positive for that local industry in Derry and for the wider tourism potential. So, it benefits the tourism end of things and the people who are involved in catching oysters.

Mr Clarke: To correct the Minister, my colleague's suggestion was that the shortness of her statement proves how inefficient and what a waste of resources the North/South Ministerial Council meetings are. The statement contains only words such as "noted", "finally" and "welcomed" and no substance on

what work is being done. What assurances can the Minister give me that they will maybe cancel the meeting in March and wait until they get something useful to meet about for the progression of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member must have taken my point very sorely to have felt the need to get up and defend his party's position. I am happy to answer any questions. You do not seem to have come forward with anything new. I am very happy to take any question from the Member on any of these issues. I think that there is quite a scope of work, which I included in the statement. I will answer questions from Members who need any further clarification. My office is on the first floor, if the Member wants to come along and talk about it some more.

I think that a lot of the work that is going on is very important. The Loughs Agency's work is key to the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas. We need to be very firm on the issue of ongoing attacks on staff, and we need to work together across the island on that issue. We have been able to do that and have had some success, which, again, is in the statement. The potential of the City of Culture year, the business plan, the regulations that have to come forward, the licensing of the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas and salmon conservation are all valid issues and warrant discussion at this meeting. We will continue to do that. The Member is part of this institution, which is linked to the Good Friday Agreement, as is the NSMC. It will continue to meet, regardless of the Member's views.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Similar to the Minister, I pay tribute to Thomas Sloan, who sadly passed away last week. Thomas was a friend and a colleague, and he represented the party with great distinction on the Loughs Agency. Can the Minister give an update on some of the agency's other INTERREG projects?

Mrs O'Neill: The Loughs Agency is the lead agency in the IBIS project, and it partners with the University of Glasgow and Queen's University in Belfast. It is funded through INTERREG IVa, and it is now well under way, given that it has completed the first year of its programme, which runs until June 2015. We have had a full complement of 12 three-year PhD students, and half the 34 one-year masters students are now in post also. The remaining 17 of the one-year studentships that are due to

complete research in the remaining 13 months of the project are to be appointed over the coming 18 months.

Two knowledge-transfer workshops were held at the Queen's University marine lab in Portaferry in September 2012, where 68 delegates explored current issues in shellfish management and regulations. At the Four Seasons Hotel in Carlingford in November, over 30 delegates examined the contribution made by the small streams to trout and sea trout populations. The latter workshop was organised jointly with the Atlantic Salmon Trust. The foundation course, Identifying Freshwater Invertebrates, was delivered by the Freshwater Biological Association, and it completed its third cycle in the IBIS programme of continuing professional development with over 30 attendees trained across two sessions, one in Scotland and one in Derry. Encouraging progress was made in the intense first full summer session of fieldwork, mostly in the Lough Foyle and Carlingford lough areas. Fieldwork for the native oyster PhD also commenced over the summer, with a survey of the spawning activity of oysters in Lough Foyle.

I hope that that gives the Member a flavour of the IBIS project. The Life project is also progressing. We are very pleased with the progress that we have had with both groups and there is so much potential for all those INTERREG projects to be taken forward.

Mr Buchanan: I do not welcome the statement because, like my party colleagues, I am critical of it and its lack of content. I question the value of the North/South meetings.

I ask the Minister about the salmon in the Foyle. The survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle is of paramount importance to the fishing industry. Will the Minister elaborate a little more on what negotiations there have been with those in the fishing industry on the survival of salmon in the waters of the Foyle?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that we have a stakeholder advisory forum that discusses all those issues. Salmon conservation will obviously be a key issue. The agency continually reports at the NSMC meetings about the survival rates of our salmon. We need to be very strong in conservation measures and look at what we can do to improve the current situation.

As I have said, the agency reported at a previous NSMC meeting that the sea-survival of Atlantic salmon had dropped from levels in excess of 30%, as recently as the 1990s, to 3%

or 4% at the current time. So that is a drastic drop. It is obviously of major concern, and so we have to continue to work with industry and fishermen, and we do that through the stakeholder advisory forum.

Earlier today, I outlined a number of the initiatives that we are taking forward. We will continue to do everything we can to maximise the conservation of fish that make it back to the rivers, because, obviously, not all fish make it back. For those that do, we need to ensure that we can maximise their conservation.

Mr Swann: Minister, I refer to point 15 of the statement, and this is perhaps more about the minutiae of what happened at the meeting. DCAL has a very specific set number of tags now. It is one tag, unlimited number per season. The Loughs Agency has a fixed number of seasons per tag. In point 15, the Minister referred to DCAL waters and Loughs Agency jurisdictions. In those waters, whose regulations or guidance takes precedence? Is it that of DCAL or the Loughs Agency?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, we will continue to work very closely with DCAL where there are areas of common interest. That is an ongoing piece of work. The Loughs Agency regulates for the Foyle and Carlingford areas. It brings forward the regulations, two of which we have put forward today. However, when it comes to working with DCAL, that Department has a position similar to ours. It wants to preserve the salmon and ensure that proper conservation measures are in place. So, any decision that is taken will be made in the best interests of the area and of the survival of the salmon.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give us an update on progress towards an aquaculture licence regime for the Loughs Agency?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to provide that in writing to the Member. It is detailed, in that we worked with the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the South. That Department recently facilitated a meeting between itself, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and the Loughs Agency on 4 December 2012.

The purpose of that meeting was to discuss the progress of the aquaculture management agreement. DAFM and the Loughs Agency did some research but, in principle, they reached an agreement on overarching issues, and the

operational issues that need to be addressed to deliver the aquaculture management agreement were also agreed. DAFM and the Loughs Agency also agreed that discussions should now take place with the agencies that have the technical responsibility in the Loughs Agency's areas relating to aquaculture, to ensure that all operational aspects within the aquaculture management agreement are finalised effectively. It is envisaged that that will happen early this year.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her statement. On the death of Thomas Sloan, I, too, offer my sympathies to his wife Eileen, his brother Felix and his extended family.

I have a general point on aquaculture. Was there any discussion on the proposed fish farm at Galway Bay, and are there any plans to develop aquaculture in a similar manner here?

Mrs O'Neill: There was no discussion on the Galway Bay situation. However, there is so much potential for the aquaculture industry here that it is something that we need to be very mindful of, not just because of tourism potential, because an oyster festival would bring in tourists, but for the opportunities to the local industry. I think that there is a lot of scope for that, and we are certainly exploring it. However, I am happy to propose it as a firm agenda item for the next meeting, and talk to the Member about it.

Mr Allister: Can I be the third or perhaps the fourth Member to refer to paragraph 12 of the Minister's statement, in the hope of a more fulsome answer from her? The paragraph states that the meeting:

"noted the latest position on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments".

I have a simple question. What is the latest position on the survival of the Atlantic salmon and how is it being measured?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member might have popped out, but I did actually answer that question some time ago. I said that the current position was this: the survival rate of Atlantic salmon has dropped from levels in excess of 30% as recently as the 1990s. It is now down to 3% to 4%. That is quite a dramatic drop. We have had ongoing surveys, and there is the IBIS project — all those things are looking at the levels of stock. It is a major concern, and action is being taken.

The survival of salmon is very high on the agenda of the Loughs Agency's work. We will continue to draw on local and international research on the issue, and to do everything that we can to maximise the conservation of the fish that make it back to the rivers and improve freshwater survival from egg to sea-going smolt.

Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Alex Attwood — Mr Alex Maskey — to move the motion. That was a Freudian slip.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 February 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill (NIA Bill 13/11-15).

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak to you later about that.

The House will be aware that the Committee began its scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill on 10 October 2012. On 20 November 2012, the Assembly voted in favour of the motion to refer the Welfare Reform Bill to an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements. The Ad Hoc Committee has now completed its scrutiny and, as Members will be aware, its report will be debated in the House tomorrow.

On 20 November, the Committee for Social Development's task to scrutinise the Welfare Reform Bill was suspended until the Ad Hoc Committee had reported, leaving the Committee with five working days to complete its scrutiny. Departmental officials and others told us that, once the Ad Hoc Committee was established, the Committee would be able to do no further work in considering the Bill. The Assembly took a decision to adopt the Committee's position and establish the Ad Hoc Committee. We were later told that we could do some consideration of the Bill. I want to point out that, in my opinion, we were not treated in the best possible way. Nevertheless, the Committee's consideration of the Bill was suspended from 20 November.

I would like to set out the tasks that the Committee still has to undertake within those five working days, if that is all that we have left, which should clarify the reason for the request to extend the Committee Stage. The Committee has to consider the Ad Hoc Committee's report; it has to receive a briefing

from the Minister, which will happen on Thursday 31 January, on his response to the paper that was sent to the Department in November; and it then has to consider its response to the Minister's presentation. We then have to consider all the proposed amendments, a number of which have been discussed and debated. I put on record that the Committee unanimously put forward a number of views to the Department for consideration, which would require amendments to the Bill.

Of course, I also state for the record that all Members will have the opportunity, in due course, to decide if they wish to table any amendments or support any amendment that may be tabled. Nevertheless, we have to consider all the amendments. We also have to undertake clause-by-clause scrutiny and agree the Committee's report. With five remaining days and with those tasks still to be carried out, I think Members will accept that the Committee agrees that it requires more time to robustly fulfil its responsibilities to stakeholders and to the House.

1.00 pm

The Bill is undoubtedly the most comprehensive reform of the benefit system in a generation, and many people will live with the consequences of it in years to come. Therefore, it is essential that the Committee carries out a robust scrutiny of the Bill, which, it should be noted, contains 134 clauses and 12 schedules. The Committee knows that the Minister is concerned about the potential costs associated with any delay in scrutinising the Bill, as are we all. However, we need to strike a balance, and that balance has to be about any costs associated with further delay and the necessary scrutiny, especially at such a crucial stage, of a very large and contentious piece of legislation. That was evidenced by the range and breadth of organisations that came to make presentations to the Committee.

I have continually told the House, members of the Committee and stakeholders that there are no delay tactics here; in fact, some of us resent that argument. Nevertheless, I want the Assembly to know that the Committee has requested a two-week extension as a precaution. We have made it very clear that we may not necessarily take the full two weeks to complete the scrutiny, and it is our intention to wind the scrutiny up as quickly as we can.

In conclusion, to allow the Committee for Social Development to complete its scrutiny as fully

and robustly as it can within an achievable time frame, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion.

I appreciate that the Committee has an important role to play and wishes to take its time to carry out a robust scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill. I thank the Committee for the time that it has allocated already to the scrutiny by sitting additional and, indeed, longer days.

I am not opposing the motion to extend Committee Stage, but I consider it important to remind the Assembly of the financial and societal repercussions of further delays in the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill. We are already operating under a very tight timetable and framework. The existing timetable for the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill has no flexibility, due to the delay in securing Executive agreement prior to the summer recess last year and the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee on 21 November 2012 to consider the Bill's conformity with equality and human rights requirements. Transferring the Bill to the Ad Hoc Committee extended the timetable by 30 working days, during which time the work of the Social Development Committee on the Bill was stalled. I have already indicated that there are elements of the current reform programme that I have difficulty with and that I sought to address those through dialogue with Lord Freud, Iain Duncan Smith and, indeed, others at Westminster. I am, therefore, considering the concerns raised by the Social Development Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee, and I will respond as appropriate. In view of the concerns raised by the Social Development Committee, I will brief the Committee on Thursday of this week.

I remain deeply concerned that any further delay in the passage of the Bill could have an impact on our position in terms of costs and, indeed, support from DWP. When I spoke against the motion to establish an Ad Hoc Committee in November last year, I pointed out that, if the process is delayed by 10 days, the cost to the Northern Ireland block is £4 million and that a 30-day delay would be £13·1 million.

During his visit to Northern Ireland last year, Lord Freud publicly expressed his disappointment that the Assembly had voted to transfer the Bill to an Ad Hoc Committee, as it will mean that we will not be able to maintain parity with DWP on the timing of changes to the two social security systems. Lord Freud also

pointed out that the current delay in taking the Bill through the Assembly will cause difficulties and make his job of supporting Northern Ireland and its need for flexibility in implementing welfare reform that bit more difficult.

There is a need to fully understand that securing agreement to change IT systems or, indeed, adopting different policies that have long-term costs to the Exchequer require its support and goodwill. That will be difficult to achieve when there are delays to the passage of the Bill. If the Bill is delayed unduly, it will have a detrimental effect on the Northern Ireland block and for the people of Northern Ireland, particularly if we do not have enough money to mitigate some of the effects of welfare reform. Therefore, in the circumstances, I strongly urge the Committee for Social Development to complete its scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill before 19 February if possible. In that context, I welcome the Committee Chair's comments that every effort will be made to ensure that, if possible, that work can be done in less than the two additional weeks that are being sought.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. First of all, I thank the Minister for his acknowledgement that the Committee has devoted a lot of time to the Bill, as is appropriate. In my opening remarks, I made it clear that, as it has been described, it is the most important reform to the welfare system in a generation. It is, therefore, critical that the Committee devotes as much time and energy to it as is needed. That is why we seek the extension.

I want to reiterate one point with regard to our response to Lord Freud. I have met him on a number of occasions, both as a party representative and as Chair of the Committee. Of course, he met the Committee along with the Minister. Lord Freud made it very clear that the Bill is the direct responsibility of this House. Some of the remarks that were taken to be almost a chastisement of the Committee were actually ill advised and unwelcome. We have a responsibility. The Minister, rightly, makes it clear that we have a responsibility. We have taken it very maturely on board. We will continue to do that.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I am just finishing off my remarks.

I have made it clear on the Committee's behalf that it has no interest in delaying the Bill. We are aware that there may be financial

consequences, but we are also very aware of our direct responsibility. The Bill will have societal repercussions and consequences. Therefore, I want to make it very clear, on behalf of all its members, that the Committee does not intend to delay its deliberations any further than is necessary. It intends to complete its consideration of the Bill as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 February 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill (NIA Bill 13/11-15).

Private Members' Business

Programme For Government: Social Disadvantage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other speakers will have five minutes.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps his Department is taking to deliver on the commitments relating to tackling social disadvantage contained in the Programme for Government which the Department for Social Development is responsible for delivering.

One of the priorities in the Programme for Government is creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being. The Minister has said:

"As a Department, with our strong mission to tackle disadvantage, we contribute directly and indirectly to all of these priorities."

The priorities are growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future; creating opportunities; tackling disadvantage; improving health and well-being; building a strong and shared community; and delivering high-quality and efficient public services, such as to implement new structures to support the improved delivery of housing services.

The demand for social housing continues to grow, with nearly 40,000 people seeking social housing and over 20,000 of them in housing stress. The Minister has committed to develop and consult on a new housing strategy, which is ongoing. It has been introduced for consultation and is already contentious. The Minister is also committed to reducing the number of social homes that fail to meet the agreed standard. Much more planned maintenance is required. He has committed to better regulation of the private rented sector. So far, we have a light touch, going nowhere near what is needed. He has committed to assisting vulnerable people to live as independently as possible, so far promoting benefit cuts and implementing welfare reform, which will impact adversely on the most vulnerable. The Minister has said that the

current levels of benefit claims are likely to be unsustainable, yet one third of our population relies on social security, not through choice, and nearly 60,000 children live in poverty. He says that the approach to welfare reform in tackling poverty must be focused on reducing benefit dependency whilst protecting the most vulnerable. Can the Minister explain how that might be achieved? Also, can he explain how the proposed reform of the welfare system will tackle the root causes of poverty?

The Minister has said that through welfare reform, through our developing housing strategy etc

"we will focus on initiatives that can build our economy, provide jobs".

Those are indeed all worthy aspirations. The underlying principle of welfare reform is to get people into work and off benefit, and no one would disagree with that. The reality, however, is that there are no jobs and to introduce cuts and penalise people at this time can only make a bad situation worse.

A recent report in Britain stated that, to have a reasonable standard of living, a person needs to earn £7·20 an hour, yet the minimum wage here is £6·19 an hour. A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that half of children in poverty live in a working household. Maybe the Minister can explain his rationale when he said in October 2011:

"At the centre of my Department's approach to tackling poverty is implementing universal credit as part of the welfare reform agenda, with its focus on helping people to escape the benefit trap, supporting those who can work into work and making work pay through a reformed system of income disregards." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 67, p270, col 1].

Where is that work at present? In some of the most deprived wards in the North, child poverty figures stand at 63%, which is an appalling statistic, while the average in council areas in Britain is 21%. In explaining to us how his Department is tackling social disadvantage, perhaps the Minister could spend less time selling the concept of welfare reform and get on with the real task of alleviating hardship and deprivation across the Six Counties.

Ms P Bradley: Poverty and deprivation have significant impacts on life's outcomes. That has been known for many years, and I am particularly happy that the issue is being

addressed so robustly by the Assembly. There have been promising signs that measures put in place by Departments so far are beginning to have real impacts on lives in our society. I welcome the statistics on poverty — absolute and relative — that have shown a decrease in the number of people who find themselves living in these conditions.

Working in the area that I represent has highlighted to me the true effect that living in social deprivation has on our young people as individuals and on communities as a whole. It is easy to read statistics and reports about how people cannot afford to feed their children or heat their home or are even homeless because they cannot afford their housing costs. That, of course, is a reality. Often, the stigma attached to living in such conditions causes people not to seek help or speak about the reality of their life.

The Department for Social Development has implemented a number of initiatives that are obviously having a real effect on our communities. For example, there is no doubt that campaigns to encourage people to claim the benefits that they are entitled to have made a direct contribution to raising people out of poverty. The time is right to continue building on that success and to try to ensure that, with the current economic climate that we find ourselves in and with the impending necessary welfare reforms, we keep the momentum on this issue. It is important to ensure that people realise that the system is in place to help them when they need it but that life on the system should not be considered as an acceptable alternative to employment.

I know of schools that were so concerned that children were coming to school hungry that they implemented breakfast clubs, which were free for everyone to attend. That initiative had the benefit of ensuring that those who needed it most were able to access it, while none of their peers would be able to single out those who did not have the monetary means to pay for the service. In such initiatives, all sectors will be vital partners in working with all our Departments to ensure that we come up with initiatives that the community will use and will be able to access. I believe that the Department for Social Development has realised the potential of the third sector to encourage those who work day and daily with the issues faced by deprived communities to come up with new ideas to help those communities to help themselves.

The commitment to tackling social disadvantage is an integral part of the Programme for Government. Children in social

disadvantage grow to be adults in social disadvantage, who then raise children in social disadvantage. We need to break that cycle. Children in social disadvantage are more likely than their peers not living in social disadvantage to become adults in the same situation. We already know how social disadvantage has affected educational outcomes for Protestant working-class boys, thanks to the study conducted last year. We must ensure that we continue to address that issue to encourage better outcomes for all our communities.

1.15 pm

Mr Copeland: I also welcome the opportunity to debate and highlight the issues in the motion. Tackling social deprivation must surely be an issue that truly unites all parties. We may differ on the methods we think are best or the programmes we think are more effective than others, but, on the whole, no one could disagree with the broad objective of tackling fuel poverty and social exclusion.

Unfortunately, recent economic difficulties have made what was already a difficult life for many people in Northern Ireland even harder. We have the highest level of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom. Just last week, we learned that the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits in December 2012 — the month in which Christmas occurred — stood at a startling 65,200, which was an increase of 500 on the previous month. When we talk about unemployment figures or the proportion of people claiming benefits, we must always remember and reiterate the point that it is not as clear-cut as it may at first appear. Unemployment itself is only part of the overall picture for people who lack but want paid work. A large proportion of all those who lack but want paid work were and are considered to be economically inactive rather than unemployed, either because they were unable to start work immediately or were not actively seeking work.

Unfortunately, there is not enough time in the debate for me to go through every commitment in the Programme for Government, but, following the wording of the motion, I will make specific reference to a number that the Department for Social Development is responsible for delivering.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I believe that he is failing to deliver adequate social housing. He will no doubt stand up and say that he has met his targets, but I put it to him that the fact that the social housing development programme has significantly

underspent this year to the tune of £8 million shows, in some way, a lack of ambition on his part. When I look at the number of people on the waiting list, especially those considered to be in housing stress, I do not see that being reduced enough to merit the handing back of so much money in a single year. There are also, of course, the housing issues associated with the Welfare Reform Bill, as and when that goes through, and the Minister's subsequent failures to adapt to meet the changing pressures there.

Under priority 2 — creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being — there is a commitment that the Department will tackle fuel poverty. I am sure that the Minister is aware that recently published figures show that the rate has fallen by only 2%, from what was a record high of 44%. I know that those figures reflect a time before the current Minister was in position, but I respectfully put it to him that, so far, there has not been enough innovative or radical thinking and that that must also be judged as a less than adequate reduction. We will talk more about that matter next week.

I will take a brief moment, if I may, to refer to another key challenge, this time in the field of education, which was mentioned a few moments ago. It is intractably linked to the demands placed on DSD. There is huge educational inequality across Northern Ireland. Children receiving free schools meals are much more likely not to attain the expected levels of educational qualifications. Annual statistics reveal that young people living in an area of deprivation do significantly worse than their peers who perhaps live a few miles or, in some cases, a few hundred yards away. That is particularly prevalent in my constituency. Such an obvious correlation between wealth and educational achievement in Northern Ireland is, to me, abhorrent. The Minister will be well aware of the pressures that low education qualifications place on the social security system.

It is highly regrettable that much of the work that Departments do across the Executive has not led to a tangible decrease in social deprivation. That individualistic approach is perhaps part of the problem. Too many people are doing slightly different things, and nobody is really talking to anyone else. I am aware that there is an intention in OFMDFM to tackle the silo mentality, which I feel contributes to some of the difficulties.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to detail exactly how tackling social disadvantage is monitored. Given its relatively few overarching

commitments on the issue, the Programme for Government relies heavily on all Departments doing the best that they can. Unfortunately, until people on the ground start to see real changes and real differences to their life, they may still have the feeling that the Chamber, the Executive and the Departments are failing them.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The SDLP had sought to amend the motion by widening it to learn what other Departments are doing to tackle social disadvantage, rather than concentrating solely on DSD's delivery, or otherwise, on its commitments to do so in the Programme for Government.

Although DSD is charged with this responsibility, poverty and social deprivation can meaningfully be tackled only through a collaborative and cohesive approach by Departments, involving DARD, DEL, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and — last but by no means least — OFMDFM. It is vital that a proper cross-departmental approach be taken to mitigate the poverty that, despite what the Northern Ireland poverty bulletin may say, is increasing in the North. Do not take my word for it, but ask and listen to those on the breadline and those on the front line: charities, churches and community organisations trying to keep —

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that some of the very good work that not just DSD but DETI and others are doing to prepare people, particularly young people, through providing training, skills and adaptable skills to get them into work, is a good example of cross-departmental work? We should see more of that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Member for his intervention. I certainly agree that there are good examples of cross-departmental work. The Member gave one example. There are others but, sadly, not that many others and certainly not enough others.

If we listen to charities, community organisations and churches, which are trying their best to help their people to keep their head above the rising tide of despair, we can only

conclude that poverty is increasing here. The global economic situation has had a profound effect here, and, although the Assembly is not responsible for creating those problems, it is responsible for mitigating them. Focusing on the motion and on the steps that DSD is taking to deliver on commitment 2 of the Programme for Government, we can also refer to the Department's corporate plan, entitled 'Together, tackling disadvantage, building sustainable communities', which certainly recognises its role. Long-term goals, the creation of positive engagement with communities and striving for economic prosperity in communities are works in progress, and I am sure that the Minister will update us on any successes therein.

Explicitly under commitment 2 is the delivery of 8,000 social and affordable homes, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's assessment of progress on that. The SDLP was concerned that the figure of 8,000 was nowhere near enough to meet what is an ever-growing demand for social housing. We are now convinced that it is not. Furthermore, in our eyes, it is nothing short of disgraceful that, in the face of that demand, DSD has handed back money designated for social newbuilds. Although we support co-ownership schemes, they are well beyond the reach of those on the margins of society.

In June, the Minister issued a statement in June welcoming a reduction in poverty here, on the basis of figures in the Northern Ireland poverty bulletin. I have alluded to questions that I had on how those figures were calculated. Absolute poverty is calculated as an income below 60% of the UK median in 1998-99, which was a year of some prosperity, taking no account whatsoever of the huge increases in fuel and food costs, let alone inflation. That is an easy way to make absolute poverty seem lower than it is. Whatever was in that bulletin, which the Minister regurgitated, bad times are here, and worse times are just around the corner for thousands of people, thanks to welfare reform.

The Rowntree report is somewhat more realistic in its conclusion that poverty for children, working-age adults and pensioners is rising and that welfare changes will hit those groups harder in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. We have seen an increase in pensioner poverty while it has dropped in Great Britain. We have a higher percentage of adults not in paid work than the other regions do. I reiterate our disappointment that our amendment was not accepted, particularly as we need to focus on OFMDFM's responsibility to tackle child poverty and its failure to do so meaningfully thus far. We acknowledge the various schemes that

DSD has brought forward to reduce fuel poverty. As Mr Copeland said, we will speak in greater detail on those in a debate next week. However, I feel that even those schemes, particularly the boiler replacement scheme, can be improved so that they have a bigger and better impact.

We welcome the motion and believe that the Assembly —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Durkan: — and the Executive, not just DSD, should take additional steps to reduce disadvantage here.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to join others in focusing on tackling social disadvantage.

The Programme for Government sets out a number of ways in which the Department for Social Development will seek to reduce and prevent social disadvantage during this mandate. That includes tackling fuel poverty, ensuring that there are adequate and affordable social homes, ensuring that those who are entitled to benefits receive them, maintaining a superb voluntary and community advice sector and improving the thermal efficiency of all Housing Executive stock. We should recognise that, when delivering on those commitments, the Department faces financial restraints, due to the reduction in the block grant. We also face challenges as a result of welfare reform. Therefore, we need solid policies to deal with its impact and to support those most affected. Our Executive, therefore, must develop new and innovative measures in response to social deprivation.

Others have discussed benefit dependency, education and child poverty. I will focus on fuel poverty and housing. Deprivation cannot be addressed while maintaining divisions in our society that drain resources and deter investment and growth. There is a clear correlation between the areas that have suffered most from division and segregation and those that are lowest in a range of health, education and economic indicators.

The Programme for Government commitment on reducing fuel poverty remains a real challenge. By not taking forward the green new deal plans, we missed a great opportunity for government to work in partnership with a coalition of all parts of civic society on a comprehensive programme to tackle energy

inefficiency and to address fuel poverty and rising energy costs while creating sustainability, jobs and a low-carbon economy. The Minister will, no doubt, remind me that the £12 million set aside for the green new deal is now being used for the boiler replacement scheme.

Although I obviously welcome any steps that are being taken, I ask whether he recognises that that scheme will probably deliver far less than the green new deal would have done for the same investment.

Energy inefficiency in homes is a key cause of fuel poverty. There is a challenge in whether it is better to carry out small measures on a large number of homes, thereby spreading resources thinly, or to take a section of homes at a time and really make them energy-efficient.

Continuing that theme, although the DSD target to ensure that all Housing Executive properties are fitted with double glazing is commendable, it may have limited benefits on its own. The Minister should also be working to ensure that lofts and cavity walls are well insulated and that homes have efficient heating systems. I wonder if the Minister has considered whether energy-proofing homes through an area-based approach might be more effective in dealing with fuel poverty. Making areas more attractive due to their quality of provision might also lead to movement in the housing stock in a much more positive way than the bedroom tax.

1.30 pm

The recent announcement about the future of the Housing Executive also provides an opportunity to develop a regional shared housing strategy, which eliminates fear and intimidation in housing choice and delivers social and affordable housing in areas free from permanent political allegiance to any party, group or identity.

In some of our most polarised estates, more than 80% of the residents are from the same religious background, and the fact that an area is perceived as belonging to one side of the community or another results in all sorts of negative economic and social consequences, such as a loss of investment, a paramilitary economy and people less willing to use basic services. Even worse, that interacts with other aspects of poverty to create multiple pockets of deprivation.

We should, therefore, seek to promote shared housing in all sectors. It can promote good relations and create a diverse, inclusive and aspirational environment in which to live.

Although I welcome the work that has been undertaken by the Housing Executive around shared housing, such as the shared neighbourhood programme and the signing of shared future charters, a lot more needs to be done.

We, in Stormont, have an opportunity and a chance to address the underlying divisions and hostilities that have undermined economic and social development. Those divisions will continue to prevent dynamic development, deter investment —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: No; not at the minute, thank you. They will also combine with poverty to produce a toxic mix of division, exclusion and disadvantage. Therefore, all Ministers have their part to play in addressing those divisions and in ensuring that Northern Ireland becomes a better place for everyone. I look forward to hearing from the Social Development Minister today on where he has made progress and what areas he intends to focus on in the future to best address the needs of our most vulnerable.

Ms Brown: There is no denying that social disadvantage and poverty remain major issues in our society. Every day, we are confronted with evidence of whole communities struggling to come to terms with the realities of the current climate of economic hardship. It is how the Assembly tackles those issues that will ultimately define whether it really delivers for those who elect us. I am firm believer in devolution. I believe that locally elected MLAs and those who become Ministers are privileged to be sent to this place on behalf of their communities so that they might deliver real change.

It is incredibly frustrating that the recent terms of the Assembly have been truly hampered by the dire economic climate in which we find ourselves. However, that should not deter us from being determined to deliver change. It should also not deter us from truly scrutinising and challenging the decisions taken centrally at Westminster that impact on us. I am pleased that the Minister has worked closely with his counterparts in London to ensure that the vulnerable in our society have a voice.

Those at a disadvantage include people from all walks of life, be they disabled, unable to work at all or wholly dependent on benefits through no fault of their own. It can also include those at an educational or training disadvantage for the

purposes of securing reasonably paid employment. Although it is reasonable that we target geographical areas deemed to be most in need, the current climate means that we can no longer rely on postcodes to highlight disadvantage. Nowadays, those in need can be found in relatively affluent areas of towns that previously might have been regarded as immune from poverty and its causes.

It is appropriate to step back from the definitions and detailed policy for a moment and look at the human aspects of poverty and social disadvantage and how they impact the lives of those at the centre of this debate. As stated, those at a social disadvantage may lack the necessary qualifications to secure work. They may not have the educational ability to manage modern society's complex methods of interaction themselves or on behalf of their children. In the home, they may not be able to provide food or heating, and each day will bring harsh choices about priorities. We know that many parents face the choice of whether to feed their children or pay for other necessities. Inevitably, that can begin the descent into poverty, not just for the parents but for their children in future years.

Many of the issues that challenge us across government — antisocial behaviour, poor educational achievement, pressures on healthcare or, indeed, community tension — can have poverty and disadvantage at their root or as a contributory cause. Many of those classed to be in absolute or relative poverty will be dependent on benefits in some shape or form. In fact, some may not be receiving any of the benefits that they are entitled to. That is a concern that I know the Minister shares, which is why he has launched a number of initiatives to increase benefit uptake. Such actions have seen benefit uptake increase by £40 million since 2005 and made a real difference to the lives of some 12,000 people.

Tackling social disadvantage is not a responsibility for the Department for Social Development alone: the Departments of Justice, of Education and for Employment and Learning also play roles in assisting those communities. Members will be aware of the concessions that the Minister recently secured from London in the implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill. I welcome those, and the Minister has my full support in holding to account policymakers in London. It is time that we all moved on from the politics of the past and fully engaged in this place and in Westminster to ensure that our fledgling institutions here can properly develop into full devolution that delivers real change.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. We, as an Assembly, face nothing more important than tackling the serious problems of poverty and social deprivation, but dealing with that has to be focused and done with objective need at its core. While we try to find ways of dealing with the serious economic problems that face the North, we should never forget those in most need in society. For some communities, these problems are not new. Many of our communities have suffered deprivation for a generation or more. That is why it is so important that we get whatever the strategy is right.

The Programme for Government sets out its commitment to tackle the scourge of disadvantage. The Minister, in his foreword to the Department for Social Development 'Corporate Plan 2011-2015', speaks of the challenge of "tackling poverty". He also speaks of "supporting our poorest communities" and states that most of the departmental work is directed towards the "most disadvantaged" citizens. That is to be commended, but we need to be constantly reminded of where that will take us and where we are at present. That is at the core of the motion. It is also important that we take time to evaluate where we have arrived in delivering strategies and commitments, particularly those in the Programme for Government. We need to ensure —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: I will indeed.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member. The Minister's constituency and mine, North Belfast, has many deprived communities too. Does he therefore agree with me that the way to really tackle this is for the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, the Department of Education, and other Departments — working with Belfast City Council, the education and library board, and so on — to have a joined-up strategy in taking forward these initiatives? It cannot be done by a Department in isolation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr F McCann: I would not say that it is only for the Department, but the core responsibility to deal with deprivation rests with DSD. I was and still am a big supporter, as the Minister knows, of neighbourhood renewal. I believe that, at its

core, neighbourhood renewal is a good programme. It lacked buy-in from other Departments. I and our party have consistently said that that is where the problem lay in neighbourhood renewal: partly with the Department, but mostly with other Departments not buying into it, which was key.

In any of these strategies, you need to take time out to look at how it is being delivered and what impact it is having. We need to ensure that we are on the road to delivery. That is why we tabled the motion. I and the people I represent live in a constituency that has suffered the ravages of poverty and deprivation for many decades. Only recently, it was declared the unhealthiest place in the North to live. In fact, five of the top 10 most deprived wards across the North are in my constituency. Whiterock and Falls are one and two. The New Lodge is three. Shankill is in fourth, followed by East and then Crumlin, Clonard, Creggan Central, Ardoyne and Twinbrook.

Over the past few weeks, I have heard representatives speak about poverty in communities that are being left behind in dealing with deprivation. It is right for them to do so, but I advise them to look at the facts. The statistics will clearly tell you where the difficulties rest. Would it not be great if we spoke of dealing with poverty no matter where it exists? Would it not be better if we recognised that we face serious challenges in making things better for those most in need? Poverty does not know that there is a religious divide in our society. It bites as hard on the Shankill as it does on the Falls.

I recently had the Minister for Social Development in my constituency. He has seen for himself the difficulties faced by people in an area in serious social stress. An inner city area that has seen its population shrink over the past three decades, it has battled against some of the worst housing conditions, in what were the Divis flats, and come out the other end through hard campaigning for change. It also battles against the worst social deprivation across the city. To add to that, it is viewed as the worst area for anti-community activity. I again emphasise that, across the interface, we have the Shankill, another area of high social deprivation. The area is divided by a wall, but not by social consequences of inner city living. There is more that binds us together than divides us.

The motion asks the Minister to outline what steps his Department has taken in delivering what is contained in the Programme for Government. Maybe we can bring communities

together to tackle the real evils of poverty, social deprivation and, just as importantly, sectarianism.

Mr Eastwood: We welcome the motion before the House today. Like my colleague Mr Durkan, I express my disappointment that our amendment was not taken. Our amendment attempted to do what many Members have said today; to try to widen out the responsibility for dealing with social disadvantage across the Departments. It is clear that DSD has a central role in dealing with social disadvantage. However, it is also clear that, when we talk about social disadvantage, we understand that poverty is at the heart of it all. Of course, OFMDFM has a real responsibility to tackle poverty.

We all know that things are not rosy in the garden when it comes to the economy here. Some very good things are happening. In my constituency, a lot of work is being done this year to try to lift the mood of the people and leave a legacy of economic good fortune. However, figures released last week show that 30 young people leave our city every week, 2,000 people are on the housing waiting list, and we have one of the highest unemployment figures across these islands.

We have to understand that things are very, very difficult, and that each and every one of us has a responsibility, not least OFMDFM. I want to touch on that. It is important that we understand that this is wider than just DSD. Look at the social investment fund. We are now finally seeing some movement in delivering on that. That has taken far too long. We need to ensure that, whatever money is spent, we leave a real legacy of tackling social disadvantage.

One of the real difficulties we face in this part of the world is our very high level of child poverty. In fact, the figures show that over 120,000 of our children live in child poverty. Last year, the Executive's own performance delivery unit, when looking at the Executive's delivery on the targets in the previous Programme for Government, left a lot of lines in red writing. That means that those particular targets had not been met. There was a target to halve child poverty by 2010. That was not delivered upon. There was a target to work towards the ending of severe child poverty by 2012. Obviously, that was not delivered upon. There was a target to meet a 15% reduction in the rate of suicide. That is still in red. There was a target to reduce by 50% the life expectancy differential between the most disadvantaged areas and the Northern Ireland average. That is still in red,

too. There was a target to increase attainment levels in primary schools, with the majority of pupils from neighbourhood renewal areas moving to within 5% of the Northern Ireland average. That has still not been delivered upon. So, we have a real difficulty, with 120,000 of our young people and children still living in poverty.

1.45 pm

I am not going to stand here and defend the Minister for Social Development. I understand that he has a very particular role in dealing with this. It is very difficult when we look at what is coming down the tracks; all of those things that I mentioned are there already. There are 120,000 children still in poverty. We have not even factored in what the oncoming onslaught of welfare reform will mean for our most disadvantaged children and young people right across the board. I encourage the Minister, in his dealings with the Social Development Committee going forward, to ensure that all that can be done is done to mitigate the real difficulties that are coming down the track from welfare reform.

I will finish by saying that it is important that we all accept a responsibility in this House and especially in the Executive. None of us can stand on the sidelines and pretend that it is Mr McCausland's fault or somebody else's fault. Each and every Minister in the Executive has a responsibility to deliver an end to social disadvantage and child poverty. I hope that all parties take that very seriously and understand that it is a cross-cutting issue. In fact, it is the most important issue in trying to end social disadvantage in our society.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I have listened with interest to all of the Members who spoke in the debate, and I thank all who contributed for their input. I hope that I am able to respond to all of the issues raised, but if I miss any, I will certainly write to the Member concerned.

My Department has direct responsibility for six commitments in the Programme for Government 2011-15. Those commitments cover a wide range of issues, from supporting social enterprise growth to providing social and affordable homes and reducing fuel poverty. I will refer to some of the comments that people made, because folk did stray beyond the confines of those six commitments in the Programme for Government, but I still want to respond to them.

All six commitments are interlinked, as they are all directly or indirectly targeted at addressing poverty and disadvantage, with a focus on those individuals, families and communities that are the most deprived. I am, therefore, pleased to report that my Department has made, and is continuing to make, good progress in meeting our targets.

I will talk about each of the commitments and our achievements to date in more detail. Four of the six Programme for Government targets concern housing issues. Housing plays a hugely significant role in creating a safe, healthy and prosperous society. My housing strategy — the first housing strategy in Northern Ireland — which I launched for public consultation in October, set out my vision for housing in Northern Ireland. In it, I set out my proposals for housing as a means to help support and sustain economic recovery, create employment and help regenerate some of our most deprived and socially disadvantaged communities. The strategy not only focuses on the delivery of the Programme for Government-specific targets but goes much further in creating the conditions for stable, sustainable, accessible, good, affordable and well-managed housing to support economic growth and prosperity.

Achieving those aims presents many difficult challenges as well as opportunities and will mean some significant structural change in the housing sector. I will return to that later. First, I want to focus on specific targets related to housing. My Department is committed to delivering 8,000 new social and affordable homes over the life of the Programme for Government. In 2011-12 we delivered a total of 2,053 new homes and have a similar number planned for 2012-13. We are, therefore, making good progress towards fulfilling our commitment in full by 2015. That will help a significant number of those in housing need to access new homes while assisting a significant number of families and individuals onto the first rung of the housing ownership ladder. That investment in new homes also provides some much needed support to our construction industry —

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr F McCann: In relation to the 8,000 houses, I think there has been some confusion about that commitment. You talk about social and affordable houses. Will you give me a breakdown? Does that take in co-ownership —

I believe that it does — or is that additional to the 8,000 that are being built?

Mr McCausland: No, there are various forms of affordable housing included within that 8,000.

This investment in new homes also provides some much-needed support to our construction industry in these particularly difficult economic times, bearing in mind that we know that for every 10 jobs created through the social housing market, seven will be sustained elsewhere.

My Department is also making significant inroads into fuel poverty through the delivery of our fuel poverty strategy. The key aim of the strategy is to remove fuel energy inefficiency as a cause of fuel poverty. It is worth mentioning the warm homes scheme, which has exceeded its target year-on-year to assist 9,000 vulnerable households per annum with a range of insulation and heating measures.

I have, however, a number of other ongoing initiatives that complement and assist delivery against the commitment to reduce fuel poverty. On behalf of the Department, the Housing Executive runs a heating replacement scheme, which aims to improve energy efficiency in the social housing sector. Furthermore, the boiler replacement scheme, which is also run by the Housing Executive on the Department's behalf, will ensure that 16,000 inefficient boilers are replaced over the next three years.

Thermal efficiency is also a part of my Department's target to ensure that all Housing Executive properties are double-glazed. The Programme for Government target requires full double glazing by the end of March 2015. The Housing Executive currently has 22,500 dwellings programmed for double-glazing insulation across Northern Ireland over the three-year period from 2012-13 to 2014-15. In excess of 6,000 double-glazing installations were started by the end of December 2012. I have also approved a further 13 schemes for some 2,400 dwellings, which should help the Housing Executive to achieve the target of 8,600 dwellings to have double-glazing installed in 2012-13. A further 9,000 dwellings are programmed for 2013-14 and the remaining 4,000 are programmed to be completed in 2014-15.

My final housing-related commitment concerns the delivery of new structures to support and improve the delivery of housing services to the citizens of Northern Ireland. Meeting that commitment will help us to ensure that social

housing delivery is on a sound basis to meet the demands of the future.

I have already mentioned the social housing reform programme. Details of my plans for that reform were set out in my written statement to the Assembly on 9 January. Those proposals set out the strategic direction for the way in which social housing will be delivered in Northern Ireland to ensure a sustainable housing system that is fit for the 21st century. They build on the success of the past but create structures that will ensure that social housing delivery is on a sound and sustainable basis to build for the future. There is still much detailed work to be undertaken to develop the proposals, and I am keen to move quickly to begin detailed consultation, design and engagement on how we can collectively realise that vision. I remain committed to working closely with key stakeholders throughout this process.

My Department's remaining Programme for Government commitments concern social enterprise growth and encouraging inward private investment through improving public spaces. Our work to invest in social enterprise growth is becoming increasingly important as we seek to increase sustainability in the voluntary and community sector and, thereby, reduce dependency on grant aid.

One of our milestones in 2012-13 is to develop a policy framework for community asset transfer across government, and that work is well advanced. The policy will facilitate the transfer of surplus public assets to the voluntary and community sector, often at below market value. In other regions, such a policy has proved to be a real catalyst for community regeneration. It can also provide a sound financial base for organisations to prosper and grow.

The work to invest in social enterprise growth is being taken forward on a number of other fronts. We have appointed Development Trusts NI as a delivery partner for the community asset transfer policy. It will have a specific role to increase capacity in the sector, to ensure that organisations are equipped to take control of assets and to test the policy framework by taking forward a number of pilot projects in 2013-14.

My Department, together with officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), has also commissioned a baseline research study to identify opportunities for growth in the social economy sector and to inform future policy development in both

Departments. The study will be published before the end of March 2013.

My Department has also supported a social economy growth pilot project with the Resurgam Trust in the Old Warren estate in Lisburn. The project will create new business start-ups and local employment opportunities in disadvantaged areas of Lisburn. The model has the potential to be replicated in other areas. It is a fine example of local people identifying community needs and taking positive action to meet those needs.

As a contribution to the Executive's commitment to building a strong and shared community, I am committed to delivering at least 30 schemes to improve landscapes in public areas to promote private sector investment in towns and cities across Northern Ireland. The schemes will be delivered by March 2015. Schemes in Belfast, Londonderry and other regional towns across the Province are well advanced. The main impacts of the schemes are to strengthen the quality of the public realm and stimulate an increase in footfall and major commercial investment. This will enhance our towns and cities as locations for inward investment and create increased employment opportunities for all.

In developing those schemes, I have been mindful to include social clauses in construction contracts, offering apprenticeships and training opportunities to young and long-term unemployed people. Public expenditure this year amounts to approximately £12.8 million.

The key focus of my Department throughout our work in social security, child maintenance and regeneration, as well as housing and community development, is tackling poverty and disadvantage. Meeting our Programme for Government commitments is crucial if the Department and the wider Executive are to address disadvantage and protect the most vulnerable. Achieving these commitments alone, however, cannot deliver the real and sustainable change that we need to tackle the persistent poverty that characterises our most deprived families and, indeed, communities.

When talking about disadvantage, it would be remiss of me not to mention at least briefly some of the other work being undertaken by my Department to deliver the Programme for Government priorities and the vision of a shared and better future for all. This work includes taking forward area-based initiatives, most notably the neighbourhood renewal strategy, to improve the life chances of those in our most deprived urban areas. It necessitates

the Department's working with a wide range of delivery partners to target and address those local issues rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach to urban regeneration.

The provision of decent and affordable housing is crucial to our regeneration activities. As mentioned, it is a prerequisite to addressing poverty and disadvantage. I outlined the aims of my recently launched housing strategy.

Officials in my Department are also playing a lead role in progressing the Delivering Social Change framework, which is a Programme for Government commitment led by OFMDFM. This contribution includes working jointly with the Department of Education and DETI in the delivery of two signature projects. The first of those involves the rolling out of an additional 20 nurture units that offer a balance of educational and domestic experiences aimed at supporting the social development of children's relationships. Our second signature project is designed to tackle dereliction and the lack of local employment by taking forward the development of approximately 10 social enterprise hubs in areas of multiple disadvantage over a two-year period. Both projects complement and assist the Department's mainstream work and will provide valuable insights into how we need to develop policies for the future.

Officials are also actively engaged with their counterparts in OFMDFM and other Departments to develop policy proposals for the medium to longer term to assist and inform our thinking for the next Programme for Government. We will still have much work to do, and I am encouraged by our achievements so far. As such, I am content that we are on the right track to deliver real and sustainable outcomes for our most disadvantaged individuals, families and communities.

In my last couple of minutes, I want to pick up on, in no particular order, a few issues that Members raised. Judith Cochrane spoke about the green new deal. I encourage her to go to the Library, pick up a copy of today's 'Guardian' and read the warning about green new deal home insulation loans. When you look at how that is working out in GB, you will see that it is not the magnificent silver bullet solution that was portrayed by many people. The £12 million that had been suggested for the green new deal was wisely, properly and correctly put into a scheme that the Member fully endorses, which is the boiler replacement scheme. I will talk more about the issue next week in a debate about fuel poverty.

I believe that we made the right choice. There are better ways of spending our money than on some of the unnecessarily expensive approaches in the green new deal. I thought it important to mention that.

2.00 pm

Mrs Cochrane also picked up on division and segregation in social housing. I repeat what I said the last time this was discussed in the Chamber: there is as much segregation in private housing, yet that is often ignored. In areas of middle-class and private housing, it is ignored. I suggest that the challenge for the Alliance Party is to face up to that. It is not simply an issue for social housing and the social housing sector; it applies across housing in Northern Ireland. That needs to be recognised. Somehow, the focus is on working-class areas being divided, but middle-class areas are equally divided. We see that again and again. So please do not pick on working-class communities. Recognise that the problem is endemic in our society, including throughout the middle class. The issue needs to be addressed, but let us be comprehensive and inclusive in our approach to it. Pamela Brown picked up on —

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: I am running out of time. I apologise.

Pamela Brown picked up on benefit uptake. We have trebled benefit uptake to £13.1 million.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McCausland: That exceeds greatly the limited success of some previous Ministers in previous years.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

The acknowledgement from the Minister of an article in 'The Guardian' this morning is welcome. I recommend that the Minister read a range of informative, damning and critical articles on welfare reform that have appeared in that paper in the past year or more. So it might be informative for the Minister to read 'The Guardian'. If you can quote from one article, you might want to quote from a number of others. However, I appreciate that the Minister is looking at the Welfare Reform Bill from a critical point of view in many respects.

First, I thank all Members who spoke in the debate. The motion is very simple and is designed to put the spotlight back on the core issue that faces us all: tackling at source a lot of the problems that our communities face. We have talked about welfare reform, and we know that a lot of people work on the basis that welfare reform may well have a serious negative impact on a lot of people in our community. We want to make sure that we can get people into work, which means that they must be eligible for work and have the capacity to work. Obviously, work needs to be available to them. We also want a community that is empowered to be a part of economic growth in the wider sense, out in the broader community, so that people can benefit from that. So it is very important that we do not deal only with welfare reform and whatever mitigating measures the Minister and all his ministerial colleagues can develop to tackle the problems arising from the Welfare Reform Bill. It is more important that we look at the source of the problem. As I said, that was the primary purpose of tabling the motion.

Again, I thank all Members who spoke in the debate. Some Members addressed a particular aspect of welfare reform, which is fair enough because we all have a lot of particular issues that come to mind. Some Members addressed a range of those issues. It is important that we arrive at a situation in which we continue to outline the steps required to tackle disadvantage and poverty. It is also important that we then set those actions into a time frame and continue to monitor and evaluate their outcomes and outworkings.

It is important that the core of the motion is directed at the Social Development Department. That is no accident, and it is not meant to suggest that only DSD has a responsibility in this area. Other Members rightly pointed out that tackling disadvantage, poverty and so on is the responsibility of a range of Departments. I place on record our thanks to OFMDFM, which has created the social investment fund and taken other measures such as Delivering Social Change, and to every other Department that has played its part in trying in some way to tackle at source the problems that our communities face. Again, however, the reason why the motion specifies DSD is that it has a lead role on behalf of the Executive on a range of commitments and on the various building blocks that are in the Programme for Government. Indeed, the Minister acknowledged that. The Minister's foreword in the Department for Social Development's corporate plan 2011-15 says that core to its mission of working to ensure that

our most vulnerable citizens are supported and protected the Department has at its disposal a budget of over £6 billion per annum and more than 6,000 staff, most of whom are focused on our most disadvantaged citizens, families and communities. Social security, child maintenance, providing social housing, addressing homelessness, supporting our poorest communities through neighbourhood renewal and a range of other issues, not least the responsibilities for revitalising town and city centres, mean that the Department's role and functions will have a clear impact on communities across the whole of the North.

As I said, we have to tackle the problems at source and on the basis of need. I do not want to go into a rehearsal of where the most deprived communities are, because deprivation and poverty know no boundaries. However, we have to have a matrix and core values at our disposal, because it is clear that we have to work through the problems that are worst in particular communities. Obviously, we know that a lot of those problems are comprehensive and complex and fundamentally require cross-departmental working.

The Minister outlined the Department's role in housing, regeneration and tackling deprivation. I welcome all the comments so far this afternoon, particularly the Minister's about his continuing commitment to tackle those issues on a comprehensive basis. However, I want the Department, in an ongoing and structured way, to continue to outline the steps that are being taken. We heard this afternoon from the Minister about initiatives that are pilot schemes or limited projects. Due to their very nature, it can take time for those to present evidence. We already have at our disposal a plethora of evidence and experience, not least in the Department. The Minister indicated that in his foreword. So, a massive amount of talent and experience is available, including those of the officials who deal with neighbourhood renewal and a wide range of other issues so that disadvantage can be tackled at its core. Some smaller pilot schemes are important and appropriate, but we know what the figures are. The statistics have been available to us for a long time.

It is important that there are building blocks in the Programme for Government and key priorities that Departments and the Executive as a whole have to address. Crucially, we need to know what responsibilities are at this Department's door. It is important that we have all those building blocks identified, as well as the lead responsibility of the Department and how the Department has taken those forward,

not just in pilot schemes but on a more comprehensive basis. More crucially, we need to identify subgroups that exist or cross-departmental initiatives that are under way. It is only when the steps are indicated and outlined to us with a set of time frames that we can have a process that will monitor and evaluate the outworkings. Ultimately, the Assembly is now almost two years into this mandate. I recognise entirely that the Executive are working in very difficult circumstances, having had £4 billion lopped off the block grant a number of years ago. We should not allow other commentators to forget that this Executive came into place with one hand behind their back, given the drastic cuts to the Budget coming from the British Government. Those cuts were shameful, and the Executive are still labouring under a significantly reduced budget.

I will finish by saying that the motion is not designed to be critical of any Minister or any Department — far from it — but wishes to place on record our thanks for all the work that is going on. However, we need to put it on record that we want a comprehensive programme with time frames so that outworkings and outcomes can be monitored. By the end of the mandate, we do not want to be in the position where are not sure how far we have advanced in meeting all of the targets in the 2011 Programme for Government set of commitments, albeit given the very difficult economic environment in which the Executive have to work. On that note, I urge the Minister, when he indicates what the building blocks, steps and time frames are, to make a commitment to work in partnership with a lot of very important allies, not least the business community, the voluntary and community sector and others, to get comprehensive plans in place to tackle poverty and disadvantage at their core in those areas.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps his Department is taking to deliver on the commitments relating to tackling social disadvantage contained in the Programme for Government which the Department for Social Development is responsible for delivering.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As you will appreciate, business has moved more quickly than we thought. The next item of business will be Question Time. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 2.10 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Business: Flag Protests

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps they have initiated to help and support local businesses affected by the violence following some flag protests. (AQO 3223/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): It is clear that the ongoing protests that have affected Belfast have led to difficult trading conditions for many local businesses. I was delighted at the announcement of a £1.5 million marketing campaign, Backin' Belfast, to which the Executive have committed £600,000. I met representatives of the traders and hospitality industry this morning to further commit our support. They told me that, over the weekend, two million tweets had included the Backin' Belfast hashtag. I think that the House would join me in wishing the campaign every success.

The Executive continue to discuss what help may be possible. They are fully behind the Backin' Belfast campaign. It will encourage people to come to Belfast to shop, enjoy a meal or avail themselves of the excellent leisure facilities and attractions that the city has to offer. It is vital to the economy of Belfast and our wider economy that the protests do not affect the confidence of people to come and enjoy the activities that Belfast has to offer.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the deputy First Minister for his detailed reply. It is encouraging that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister supports the Backin' Belfast campaign. I think that all Members of the House would be supportive of that.

Apart from financial and moral support, in the present circumstances, is it not necessary for the First and the deputy First Minister to publicly and visibly work together —

Mr Speaker: The Member must come to a question.

Mr A Maginness: — in order to calm the situation and to condemn violence and illegal protests?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that, first and foremost, the important thing as we move forward is to see an end to protests, conflict and violence on the streets. I am aware that all the political parties represented in the Assembly have made their opposition to the violence and the protests clear.

Naturally, I think that as we go forward, the key is to see stability and confidence restored so that traders in Belfast can get on with the business of supplying services to citizens. That is why, over two weeks ago, I actually met some people who were involved in the protests. That may come as a surprise to some people in the House. I also met some people who I believed could influence the ending of violence on the streets. I know that the First Minister is as committed to ensuring that there is an end to the violence as I am or any Member of the House is.

Therefore, it is hugely important that we recognise the damage that it is doing. There is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to move forward, given that we have, for example, the World Police and Fire Games here later this year and the ongoing City of Culture celebrations in my own city. They have started with resounding success with the Sons and Daughters concert, which will be followed by other important events. It is crucial that we all work together and that we are seen to work together.

As was the case with the killings of the two soldiers at Masserene, Stephen Carroll, Ronan Kerr and David Black, it is very important that we send a clear message to those anti-peace process violent extremists, whether they be of the so-called republican type or so-called unionist type, that we will not kowtow or bow the knee to their activities.

Mr Campbell: Hopefully, everyone right across the community will support the Backin' Belfast campaign. Does the deputy First Minister agree that what the entire community would also like to see is the First and deputy First Minister standing shoulder to shoulder to condemn utterly not only the violence of today but all violence, past and present?

Mr M McGuinness: Given that we are speaking specifically about events on the streets of Belfast over the past four or five

weeks, it is hugely important that all of us are seen to be standing together.

The issue of the past will probably come up later in today's Question Time. Different parties have different analyses of how to deal with that, but in this instance, it is vital that all Members and all political parties in the Assembly speak with one voice. People have issued individual statements, and I accept absolutely that all Members in the Assembly are totally opposed to violence of any description whatsoever, and all political parties have made it clear that they want the protests to end. Our efforts have to be bent towards bringing the protests to an end.

It is hugely important that we offer to speak to the people who are involved in the protests. I am willing to speak to more people who are involved in the protests. On Radio Foyle this morning, I heard people from the unionist tradition in the Waterside saying that nobody was speaking to them. I extend my offer to speak to them and am willing to go to the Waterside to speak to people who are protesting.

This is a very important year for the city. If it is a success, every community, every political party, all the Churches, as well as the community and voluntary sector, will benefit from the way in which, in the first instance, we worked together to bring the City of Culture to the city and to ensure that it is a resounding success with a legacy that can provide much-needed employment for our children, whether they are from the Protestant or Catholic tradition.

Mr Copeland: I note the Minister's comments. Does he agree with the president of Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce, Joe Jordan, that the timings of the vote taken at Belfast City Hall that led to the protests so close to Christmas was, to say the least, unhelpful?

Mr M McGuinness: I have heard that said over the past couple of weeks, and I am tempted to think that it is excusing the violence that happened on the streets, which is a big mistake. Our focus needs to be on the violent, anti-peace-process extremists, whether they are from the unionist community and are the sort of people who call for the resignation of the First Minister of our Executive, or the violent, anti-peace-process extremists who are so-called republicans who thought that it was a good idea to kill prison officer David Black or to attempt to kill a police officer in Omagh over the weekend, as appears to be likely.

We need to stand up against all those people. In my opinion, it is much better that we are seen to be doing that together. I, for one, will not kowtow to any of them, no matter how much we are threatened, and I have been threatened by those people as an individual in the past. I will not bow the knee to any of them. This peace process belongs to all our people, and we will work forward on the basis that the overwhelming majority of unionists, nationalists and republicans are behind the peace process and these institutions. Elections clearly showed that in the past.

People with Disabilities

2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they are taking to ensure that the diversity of people with disabilities is recognised. (AQO 3224/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Junior Minister McCann will answer that question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities places an obligation on government to promote, protect and ensure full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by all persons with disabilities. The involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in all facets of public life is an important aspect of the convention. The Executive's formal response to our obligations under the United Nations Convention and the findings of the 2009 Promoting Social Inclusion report on disability will be delivered in the context of a new disability strategy.

Article 33 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires that people with disabilities and their representative organisations not only are consulted by the Administration as part of the development of government policy and strategy but are required to be actively engaged.

To fulfil our obligations, a specialist in disability was engaged and worked with our officials to develop a draft strategy, on which we consulted last year. The sectoral expert also advised us on arrangements for consultation, including the development of fully accessible documentation and consultative events. With that support, we completed a consultation exercise and have developed a comprehensive strategy, which incorporates many of the views expressed during the consultation. Arrangements are now

being finalised to launch and publicise the Executive's new disability strategy.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. Does she agree with me that the onus is on us as legislators to introduce legislation to ensure that that happens?

Ms J McCann: Yes. As I said, the purpose of the strategy, which is titled 'A Strategy to Improve the Lives of Disabled People: 2012-2015', is to set out a high-level policy framework to give coherence and guidance to Departments' activities across all the general and disability-specific areas of policy. The actions that follow the strategy will also provide a framework for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and take forward the work to improve the lives of children and adults with a disability here, based on the recommendations in the PSI disability report.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What awareness-raising actions does OFMDFM plan to take forward on the disability strategy?

Ms J McCann: As I stated, article 33 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires that the Administration not only consult but engage with people with disabilities and their representative organisations as part of the development of government policy and strategy.

As I said, we engaged with someone from the sector, who worked with our officials to develop the draft strategy and the consultation exercise. With that support, we completed the consultation exercise and developed a comprehensive strategy, which incorporated many of the views that people put forward.

Mrs Dobson: Will the junior Minister join me in supporting those who want the way in which people here register for organ donation to change from an opt-in to an opt-out system?

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for that. We have discussed this, and I know that there are different viewpoints. I certainly believe that we should have further discussions. From talking to many families, I know that there are people who favour that system. However, as I say, there has to be more consultation and discussion.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the junior Minister accept that there is fear, concern and apprehension across Northern Ireland about the imminent

welfare reform changes, particularly among disabled people and the groups who represent them? Will she tell the House when the Executive will be in a position to outline the disability action plan that will coincide with the agreed disability strategy that she outlined?

Ms J McCann: Yes, I certainly agree with the Member's analysis of welfare reform and that there is a sense that people are very frightened.

As everyone in the House knows, the coalition Government's Welfare Reform Act became law in Britain on 8 March 2012. I know that the Minister for Social Development has brought proposals to the Executive for a Welfare Reform Bill to give effect locally to those proposed changes.

The people who responded to the ongoing consultation expressed a range of views on welfare reform. It is very clear that disabled people feel vulnerable because of the potential changes, especially to the likes of disability living allowance. The potential for many to lose what they see as their primary source of income, and a very important one, means that much of the strategy would ring hollow if the changes, as they are understood by the disabled community, were introduced. Therefore, we must consider the potential impact of welfare reform in the context of what we aim to achieve through delivering the disability strategy. We will look at that as well.

Delivering Social Change: Signature Programmes

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of the Delivering Social Change projects. (AQO 3225/11-15)

11. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their vision for addressing inequalities and tackling deprivation through Delivering Social Change. (AQO 3233/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to respond.

Ms J McCann: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to take questions 3 and 11 together.

Delivering Social Change is not simply a delivery framework. Rather, it is a testimony to how we need to shape our society. There is no

doubt that many individuals and communities have been plagued by inequality, poverty, deprivation and missed opportunities to fulfil their potential. We have to seriously address those issues if we are to offer any hope at all to our people, give them heart and make them feel that they have a valued place in society.

2.45 pm

In the midst of managing government and budgets, at times it can be very easy to forget the impact on people of the decisions that we make. Of course, as we make our decisions, there are always competing priorities and challenges to be faced. However, we believe that, in addressing poverty and deprivation, providing our people with a route out of those evils is fundamental to our becoming a better society.

In that vein, on 10 October 2012 the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced six significant signature programmes, to the value of £26 million, under the Delivering Social Change framework. The programmes are designed to tackle multigenerational poverty, to improve children's health and well-being, and to improve the education and life opportunities for our children and young people.

Since the announcement, the lead Departments for each of those signature programmes have appointed senior responsible owners and have developed initial programme delivery plans. Work on the implementation of those plans is ongoing, and our officials have been meeting each senior responsible officer over recent weeks to review progress and expedite delivery. It is our intention that work will be rolled out on each of the signature programmes at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Irwin: I thank the junior Minister for her reply. The programme aims to improve education opportunities and proposes rolling out 230 new teaching positions to deliver one-to-one tuition. How many of those positions will be realised in the Newry and Armagh constituency?

Ms J McCann: I cannot really tell the Member how many positions will be in the Newry and Armagh constituency, but I can say that newly qualified teachers will be rolled out. The Department of Education has now appointed the Western Education and Library Board to take the lead on the programme. The plan is that schools will recruit teachers and work in its progress on the selection criteria for

participating schools and on how the additional resource will be used in the classroom context. The Department of Education remains confident that the programme is on track to have the teachers in place at the start of the 2013-14 academic year, which is in September this year.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the junior Minister for her responses so far. I welcome the Delivering Social Change framework and the £26 million that has been allocated for the signature programmes. Does she agree that, given the amount of money in a range of other Departments' core budgets, it is more important to get the policy and strategy embedded in those various Departments' policies?

Ms J McCann: You are right when you say that the biggest return that we can get to address poverty and deprivation lies in departmental budgets. Part of the Delivering Social Change framework is about getting those Departments to work together and to test new ideas. Implicit in all that, we are shaping a new way to address poverty and disadvantage, as well as how they impact negatively on society, particularly certain parts of our society — our most disadvantaged and most vulnerable.

I believe that Delivering Social Change's greatest influence will be to change the culture within Departments' core spends. We have often talked in the Chamber about the silo culture that exists. We hope that Delivering Social Change will change that culture and that Departments will work collaboratively. The issue is more about directing where money from Departments' core budgets goes.

Mrs Overend: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. For one of the six signature programmes, the Department for Social Development (DSD), along with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), was tasked with the development of 10 social enterprise incubation hubs. Can the junior Minister tell the House how many jobs have been created so far as a result? What is the job-creation target over the project's two-year lifespan?

Ms J McCann: There have not actually been any jobs created so far as a result of the social economy incubation hubs. What is happening at the moment is that DSD and DETI are working together. We are trying to ensure that the social economy hubs are rolled out in a way that will create employment opportunities for people. However, that all has to be discussed and the best possible way put forward.

When doing this work, we have to remember that we need to create employment opportunities and regenerate communities in the top 10 most deprived areas, because that is the whole ethos of the social economy sector. Certainly, I will give the Member any update that I can once decisions have been made on those hubs and where they will be going.

OFMDFM: Equality Unit

4. **Mr Rogers** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the equality unit is yet to respond to correspondence from the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill. (AQO 3226/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill, wrote to our Department asking for a briefing from our equality unit on the role of the Equality Commission in screening legislation. A response was issued to the Ad Hoc Committee on 23 January 2013. That set out the Equality Commission's role in relation to Departments' equality schemes as per section 75 and schedule 9 of the legislation.

It is for the Department for Social Development, in the first instance, to assess whether there is a need to carry out an equality impact assessment on the Welfare Reform Bill. The Assembly agreed to the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee to consider and report on whether the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill were in conformity with the requirements for equality and observance of human rights.

Tomorrow, the Assembly will debate the report of the Ad Hoc Committee and make a decision on whether the Bill is in conformity with our obligations. If the Equality Commission has any concerns, it will direct those to the Department for Social Development. OFMDFM is not responsible for carrying out screening or an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on policies that are the remit of another Department, and the relevant information is clearly set out in legislation and in Equality Commission guidance.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the deputy First Minister for his response. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the best interests of the child is of primary consideration in any legislation. Surely the children of the North have many tiers of social disadvantage. Does he believe that in order for our children to have a level playing field an equality impact

assessment should be carried out on the Welfare Reform Bill?

Mr M McGuinness: I think we are all very conscious of the responsibilities that we have under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. DSD published a completed EQIA on its departmental website in May 2012. The Minister for Social Development is on record as saying that the EQIA was a living document and would be updated as additional data became available.

DSD has informed us that it intends to publish an updated EQIA shortly, using data from the 2010-11 family resources survey. The Social Development Minister has also advised that DSD analysts expect to receive an updated policy simulation model from the Department for Work and Pensions, and that further scrutiny of equality issues will be carried out in the form of screening and, if necessary, full EQIAs. We have also been advised that DSD has an extensive programme of work to meet its equality obligations. Minister McCausland informed us that any mitigation has to be considered within the context of the rules governing the funding arrangements for social security spending. So, no doubt the issue raised by the Member is something that can be considered under the EQIA.

Mr Swann: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. A central plank to the Welfare Reform Bill is also the lack of a childcare strategy. Will the deputy First Minister give us an update on when the £12 million held by OFMDFM will be used in developing a strategy?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, this is something that will be dealt with in due course. It is hugely important that we move forward to see the outworking of the funding that is going to be made available to ensure that we have a childcare strategy that meets the needs of citizens. No doubt during the course of the discussions that were held by the Ad Hoc Committee, this issue was fully debated and, no doubt, will be debated again here tomorrow.

Dealing with the Past

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their response to and action taken regarding the victims commissioners' report on dealing with the past. (AQO 3227/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: In preparing its report, the previous commissioners took due cognisance

of the report of the Consultative Group on the Past, which was submitted to the Secretary of State. The key areas of the report are reflections on the consultative group's report, government and politics, victims and survivors, justice and truth, and citizens and communities. Dealing with the past is a key area of our victims and survivors strategy and we have provided, and will continue to provide, support and space for dialogue on this very important topic.

As we all know, this is an emotional and contentious issue, and we all need to reflect seriously on how we might find a way forward in an inclusive and independent way. We are committed to the voices of our victims and survivors being heard and their contributions being acknowledged.

We approved the commission's comprehensive needs assessment in November 2012. The commission's advice and recommendations, including those relating to dealing with the past, have proved invaluable in shaping the new Victims and Survivors Service. Through that, we will provide a high-quality service to victims and survivors, based on their individual assessed needs and the provision of high-quality interventions to meet those needs.

Provision of services will focus on the seven areas of need identified in the comprehensive needs assessment under the three funding streams of health and well-being, social support and financial assistance. Those services will be delivered through groups, directly procured services or individual financial assistance. Along with the service, we remain committed to providing the best possible help and support to victims and survivors to ensure that they receive what they expect and, indeed, deserve.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer in so far as it highlighted some of the work that is being done to meet the needs of victims and survivors. However, what about the substantive issue of dealing with the past? That has been raised and we have seen it characterised by some of the violence on our streets. What specific actions have the First Minister and the deputy First Minister taken to deal with the past and to bring closure to many of the families who want answers? Have you had any discussions with the Secretary of State on those matters?

Mr M McGuinness: Given that the question first proffered by the Member related to the Victims and Survivors Service, my answer was in the context of relaying how that service, established under the tutelage of the new

Victims' Commissioner, Kathryn Stone, is decisively moving forward to ensure that all who approach it for assistance receive it in a way that is bespoke to their individual circumstances. I think that that is of huge importance.

When the question was first asked, there was some confusion as to whether it was about how we are supporting people who were victims and how they dealt with the past through the Victims and Survivors Service. The Member's supplementary question relates to the bigger issue of how we deal with the past.

Arising from the events of the past couple of weeks, there is no doubt that issues need to be dealt with. The past is one of those, and it is best dealt with by achieving agreement, certainly among the five large parties in the Assembly. A wide range of discussions were held prior to Christmas and after the new year, not just about that issue but a number of other issues that are of importance to people in the community, such as symbols, emblems, flags, parades, etc. A job of work needs to be undertaken in a credible way that provides an outcome that, preferably, all of us in the Assembly can sign up to.

Mr I McCrea: Sadly, many victims of the Troubles are from the Mid Ulster constituency. Indeed, I am working with people at the moment to try to set up an organisation to speak on behalf of the innocent victims of the Troubles. Will the deputy First Minister outline what funding opportunities are available to people who wish to set up organisations to help and assist people who are innocent victims?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, in the first instance, responsibility for dealing with those issues resides with the Victims' Commission and the Victims and Survivors Service. I have no doubt whatsoever that, if people make an application for support, it will be very seriously considered.

As someone who also represents the Mid Ulster constituency, I am very conscious that, right across the community, there are many who are suffering as a result of the legacy of the past. If people believe that a further group should be established, I respectfully suggest that the best way forward would be to make a submission. No doubt, that will be considered by those with responsibility to take decisions on that matter.

3.00 pm

Education

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Schools: Homophobic Bullying

1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Education to outline the level of training which teachers undertake to address homophobic bullying in schools. (AQO 3238/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Bullying, for whatever reason and in whatever form, is unacceptable. Schools are required by law to have policies in place to tackle bullying. Addressing the issue of bullying is a shared challenge, which is why my Department funds and is a member of the local Anti-Bullying Forum. The forum has produced a new resource for schools called "Effective Responses to Bullying Behaviour". Its overall purpose is to promote an anti-bullying culture in schools to help staff to provide support to pupils who have been bullied, for whatever reason, and pupils who engage in bullying behaviour. The resource is underpinned by a training programme for schools that is being delivered by education and library board staff.

The forum's website has a resources section aimed specifically at dealing with homophobic bullying, including a teachers' fact sheet. The forum has a task group devoted to tackling homophobic bullying and promoting best practice. That group has consulted young people — those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual and those who do not — about their experiences of homophobic bullying in our schools. This will inform the development of themed anti-bullying guidance for schools. In-service teacher training is provided by the education and library boards and focuses on the needs of all children and young people and is supplemented with school-based advice, ongoing telephone guidance, support in relation to specific anti-bullying issues and advice on the content of a school's anti-bullying policy. Whilst training provided by education and library boards is generic, if a school needs support with a specific type of bullying, such as homophobic bullying, it is signposted to resources or agencies with specific expertise in that area.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he detail how incidents of homophobic bullying are recorded across

schools, and can he explain whether, through increased awareness, there has been a notable increase in reports of homophobic bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: The recording of bullying and how it is recorded is a matter for schools. I am aware of engagement with gay rights groups etc and that they are concerned that there is an increase in homophobic bullying throughout our schools. However, as I said, it is a matter for schools how they record bullying. Any form of bullying is wrong, and that includes homophobic bullying. Bullying is often the product of forces exterior to the school and attitudes towards homosexuality within the community, sections of the community or perhaps even in the household. Society has a major role to play in ending the use of the type of language and behaviour that we see among adults in relation to homosexuality. If we do that, we will see a decrease in homophobic bullying in our schools.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Is the Minister content with the existing bullying guidelines for all our schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. The guidelines are open to review. Indeed, there is some research going on into the issues around homophobic bullying etc, as I outlined in my original answer. Guidelines are always open to being reissued or strengthened. As that research and the work of the Anti-Bullying Forum continue, if there is a need to strengthen the guidance or bring particular attention to any section of it, I will certainly do that.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Has a training needs analysis for dealing with bullying been carried out for all staff, and when?

Mr O'Dowd: The Anti-Bullying Forum contains members and representatives of the teaching profession and teacher training organisations, as well as gay rights groups. So there is a forum for all these matters to be raised and dealt with. If there is a feeling among teaching staff and the profession that they require refresh training on the matter, it should be raised with the Anti-Bullying Forum, which can bring it to my attention and recommend what, if any, changes are required.

Mr Agnew: Does the Minister believe that the teaching in some schools that homosexuality is a sin is in contradiction with a teacher's duty to protect pupils from homophobic bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: It has not been brought to my attention that any individual school is teaching that homosexuality is a sin. The ethos of any school is a matter for the board of governors of that school. I clearly put it on record that it is not my job to deal with morality issues; it is my job to deal with educational and community issues. However, I do not believe that such practices are beneficial to the well-being of our community. In the 21st century, we should treat all our citizens with equality and respect. Being gay and being in a loving relationship with anyone is not a sin in any context of the word as I understand it.

School Leavers: Higher Education

2. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education for an estimate of the reduction in the number of school leavers going into higher education because they choose other paths such as learning a trade, based on the school curriculum as well as advice given by careers departments in schools. (AQO 3239/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Different pathways, whether into higher or further education, training or employment, are valid for different young people. Our workforce, now and in the future, needs to be able to respond to and seize the new opportunities presented by the global marketplace in rebalancing our economy. Increasing the skills and employability base here are key drivers for growth as set out in the Executive's economic strategy, as is the need for higher professional and technical skills and higher education qualifications. The annual statistics show that, in 2006, 38.5% of school leavers entered higher education. The most recent available figures show that, in 2010-11, 41.7% entered higher education. Statistics do not reveal information on what precisely has influenced a pupil to choose a particular pathway.

My priority is to ensure that pupils are ready for work and life by the time they leave school. My policies are about putting the pupil first. That is why I am introducing the entitlement framework. The entitlement framework is about ensuring that pupils have access to a range of relevant, engaging and economically relevant courses with clear progression pathways. It is about schools, as well as young people and their parents, having high aspirations and then achieving them. The joint DE/DEL careers strategy aims to ensure that young people have access at the right time to high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance, so that they can make informed choices leading to

the most appropriate route for them as individuals.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the Minister content that the careers advice given is sufficient and of benefit to those who struggle to find employment post education?

Mr O'Dowd: I can point to the most recent Education and Training Inspectorate report, which shows that career guidance advice is good or very good in the vast majority of our schools. Over the past number of years, interventions at departmental level from DE and DEL, the policy and guidance issued to our careers teachers and the strategies that have been put forward have assisted in that. It is also down to the good work of the schools and the careers advisers from DEL and DE. We can be more confident than we were in the past about the type of career advice being given, but there is also a responsibility for parents in the equation. Parents should be imaginative about the pathways their children choose. The traditional pathways of academia will perhaps not always bear the fruit of employment in the modern global economic market we operate in. I encourage parents to explore all options with careers advisers and with their children before making choices for the future.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister detail where skills and further education have a place in the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and in area planning?

Mr O'Dowd: I am of the view that education is a skill. A good education is a very valuable skill to have moving forward. That is where that fits into the title, as far as I am concerned. The entitlement framework, which is now at the core of the educational policies moving forward, allows young people to study 24 to 27 different subjects across a range of areas, in academia, general and applied. That allows young people to make decisions about going forth in the future.

I can understand why Members are focusing on the ESA Bill; it is before the Committee. The ESA Bill is one part of our education system — a very important part — setting out how education will be managed in the future. However, underneath that is a range of policies that allow our young people to move forward with confidence into an international employment market.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's answer, in particular the reference to the involvement of parents. Does he understand

my concern that there is not a sufficiently collaborative approach by careers departments and schools towards pupils, parents and colleges and that a more defined approach has to be taken to make sure that young people move towards the creative industries rather than the traditional pathways, which, as we know now, are not the future?

Mr O'Dowd: Again, I point towards the Education and Training Inspectorate's most recent report, which highlighted that the careers advice is either good or very good in the vast majority of our schools, but we are always seeking ways of improving that. I believe that we are getting the general direction right. There will always be exceptions to the rule, and, if the Member has any instances that he wishes to raise with me privately, I will happily investigate them further.

Later, in February, I will issue an information leaflet and publicity drive — specifically aimed at parents but also at young people — around the entitlement framework. That will give them further information about exactly what the entitlement framework is designed to do. It is designed to allow our young people to equip themselves with the necessary skills across a range of subjects to ensure that they can go out into the employment world with a flexible approach across a number of subjects, which employers will find attractive, whether they are in academia or the range of industries that are out there.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Education Bill: Shared Education

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Education how shared education is promoted in the Education Bill. (AQO 3241/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Bill contains two sets of provisions that will enable and facilitate greater sharing, in my opinion. First, the provisions on area planning will span all school sectors and types. Through shared planning, we will have more shared provision, driven by the educational needs of children and young people. Secondly, establishing ESA as a single employer will help to facilitate schools' sharing of staff where there is agreement to do so. There is already much good sharing practice in education, including excellent work within area learning communities. The provisions will enable schools to build on that good practice to the benefit of all. I await the outcome of the report from the ministerial advisory group on

advancing shared education, which I should receive in early February.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Will he say whether he shares the aspiration of moving to a single education system in Northern Ireland, and, if the answer is yes, will he give an approximate timescale for when he would like to see such a system introduced?

Mr O'Dowd: My aspiration at this time is to see the ESA legislation over the line. That will be a first step towards a greater sharing of sectors than there has ever been before. We had the education and library boards and people around the one table. We also had CCMS etc. What we are doing now is bringing all the sectors around the one table, in the one authority, responsible for the delivery of education policy in the North. That is a major step forward.

Education has been pointed to many times as the solution to sectarianism in our society. Education has a significant role to play in resolving sectarianism in our society, but education is not the cause of sectarianism in our society. Therefore, it cannot be held responsible for all the ills in this society. Communities, politicians and all of us have to move forward to ensure that we can reach a stage where everyone is comfortable with a single education system, as the Member has portrayed. However, at the moment, I believe that the Education and Skills Authority is a significant step in the right direction.

Lord Morrow: The SELB viability audit showed that, of 52 post-primary schools, there are 13 — 11 voluntary plus two integrated — that have a nil deficit, while the remaining 39 have a projected deficit of £8.7 million. Why would ESA seek to destroy something that has shown that it is effective? It appears that the Minister continues to target successful schools in the Education Bill.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member either has not read the Education Bill or has read someone's version of it. I suggest that he reads the Bill and then comes back to the House to ask questions about it. There is no provision in the Bill that destroys the voluntary principle. Not a single clause in the Education and Skills Authority Bill destroys the voluntary principle. It allows for the facilitation of the voluntary principle moving forward. Indeed, it will allow for schools in the future to adopt the voluntary principle if they are willing to do so.

The Member's measure of a successful school cannot be based on the deficit or surplus of a school. There is a much broader range of issues to measure. I suggest to the Member that the continued subservient relationship of his party to certain grammar schools is not helpful. It is not helpful to the Protestant working-class communities that, you have been telling us, you have been defending over recent weeks. I suggest that, if you spent less time tugging your forelock in front of them, less time wringing your cap and more time challenging them over their responsibilities for education, our society would move forward much better.

3.15 pm

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that shared education may be an opportunity for some rural schools to survive in the context of area planning?

Mr O'Dowd: There is no general threat to rural or urban schools. There will always be a need for rural schools, which will have to be met in a different configuration from that which applies in urban areas because of distances travelled and other factors. We also have isolated rural communities who believe that their school gives them stability and confidence. I am not prepared to invoke any act that would see that eroded.

The current policy protects rural schools. They have been analysed under that policy in area planning, and they will continue into the future. Rural communities should have equality of educational provision. If schools can no longer provide equality of education, taking all the other stipulations into account, it is only right and proper to take action against such schools to make sure that rural communities are provided with top-quality education.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. He went some way to answering my question in his response to Mr McCallister. Does he believe that shared education provision will be strengthened by the Education Bill?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said to Mr McCallister, I believe that it will. The Education Bill allows for partners in education to sit at the table on an equal basis. They will have to work together on an equal basis, plan school provision together and be in a model that ensures that everyone is treated fairly and equally under the law.

I can understand that, while a Bill is progressing through the Assembly, there is continuing negotiation in public on some of its aspects. People raise concerns, some of which are genuine and some not so genuine. I urge people to read the Bill in its totality and look for the objectives and the direction in which we are heading and not simply concentrate on the needs of a minority of a minority of schools.

North/South Ministerial Council: Cross-border Education

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the North/South Ministerial Council survey on cross-border education. (AQO 3242/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The North/South Ministerial Council survey on cross-border education took place in the North between 30 October and 16 November 2012, and the survey in the South began on 11 December and finished on 18 January. Officials from the respective Departments are working towards a joint analysis of the data, and a report will be presented to the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education format on 27 February.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As a result of the area planning process, does the Minister foresee closer co-operation in border communities between primary schools and post-primary schools on either side of the border?

Mr O'Dowd: That is the logical outcome of closer co-operation under the North/South Ministerial Council and in the education sector. We require closer co-operation between public services along the border corridor. The proposals are in place for the benefit of the people who live along the border corridor. If it makes sense to do it in the health sector, it makes sense, in my view, to do it in education. I will raise the issue with my counterpart, Minister Quinn, when we next meet on 27 February.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. Does he think that the outcome of the survey will help to secure schools such as St Mary's High School in Brollagh, Belleek, and St Aidan's High School in Derrylin?

Mr O'Dowd: Those issues are best dealt with under two formats: the survey and area planning. Both formats have interlocking outcomes, responsibilities and information. If

there is a local solution that is viable and works for the benefit of young people, I will commit to moving it forward, but it has to be taken into account in area planning and under the North/South Ministerial Council format.

I am aware that detailed work has been done in the areas that the Member mentioned. I am studying the details of the education and library board's response on area planning, and I will comment on that when I come to the House to respond on area planning.

Teachers: Permanent Posts

6. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Education what proportion of newly qualified teachers have found permanent teaching posts. (AQO 3243/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: From 1 April 2012 to 21 January 2013, there were 639 graduates. Of the 484 registered with the General Teaching Council, 5·17% have found permanent teaching posts.

Mr McGimpsey: The Minister's answer seems to indicate a substantial deficit in the number of students who graduate as teachers and find work. How does he plan to address that deficit?

Mr O'Dowd: This relates to an earlier question that I was asked about careers advice, careers information and career choices. There is no career that, if you study for it, guarantees you a job at the end. Teaching is clearly one of those areas. Indeed, for the graduates and postgraduates in a wide range of subjects coming out of our universities, there is no guarantee.

Over the past number of years, we have reduced our trainee teacher intake by 32%. Our teacher training colleges just about operate on a basis on which they are viable. So we have a choice to make. We can decide to continue to dramatically reduce our teacher training intake to the point at which our teacher training colleges become completely unviable. If we do that, our students will travel to England, Wales or the South of Ireland to train as teachers. When they come back, whoever is in the ministerial post at the time will be asked, "How many of our trainee teachers are not in work?". The figures will be similar, but we will have lost our teacher training colleges. We will have lost the ability to train our teachers in our curriculum.

The Member may well shake his head, but he was the Minister of Health. I am sure that,

when he was looking at the training numbers for nurses, doctors and other medical professionals, this was also in his head. Do we be completely abandon training here, or do we plan a provision that allows for an intake that is currently around 600? In tandem with that, we have encouraged schools to recruit newly qualified teachers. We have encouraged schools to ensure that, when looking for substitute teachers, they use newly qualified teachers instead of bringing back retired teachers. The Department has done everything in its power to ensure that newly qualified teachers are given a fair playing field when seeking employment in our education system. However, Members will have to answer this question: do they want teacher training to occur here, or do they want all our students to travel elsewhere? That is the decision that will have to be made.

Mr Dallat: I have listened carefully to the Minister's response. I certainly do not suggest that we do not have teacher training in Northern Ireland. However, given our awful levels of literacy and numeracy, I suggest to the Minister that he consider finding places in schools to at least give newly qualified teachers an opportunity to get their qualifications and stop the mass exodus to other countries to find a job.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that we have introduced a scheme whereby, over the next couple of years, over 200 newly qualified teachers will perform exactly that task in our schools. The Executive have made a financial commitment to do that. However, the Member will also be aware that the block grant — for want of a better term — provided by the British Government has been slashed dramatically and all Departments are operating on a cut budget. Where would the Member like me to take money out of the education budget to employ all the unemployed newly qualified teachers? If you are going to do one, you have to do the other. There are no simple answers to any of these questions.

Mrs Hale: What action is the Minister taking to ensure that there is a level playing field and that newly qualified teachers can move between the controlled sector and CCMS?

Mr O'Dowd: The only barrier, if it is a barrier, relates to the Catholic certificate. I assume that that is what the Member refers to. The Catholic certificate is available through St Mary's and through distance learning from Stranmillis, so all qualified teachers can obtain it.

In my answer to Mr McGimpsey about removing barriers to achieving employment for all teachers, I referred to my Department making it less attractive for newly retired teachers to return. We have made it less attractive for schools to employ retired teachers on a temporary basis and more attractive for them to take on newly qualified teachers. So, I am not suggesting for one moment that it is not difficult for newly qualified teachers out there. It is difficult, and I have had representations from many newly qualified teachers who have not obtained employment. However, we have reduced the intake by 32%. The next reduction, if we do that, will likely see the removal of teacher training colleges altogether. That would be an economic mistake, and it would be a mistake for our educational strategy. Teacher training colleges here teach towards our curriculum. If you go to England, Wales or down South, you learn to their curriculum, which is not what our young people learn. So, let us ensure that the actions that we take are measured and that we have sustainability not only in our schools but in our teacher training colleges.

Nursery Education: Class Sizes

Mr Speaker: I call Patsy McGlone.

Mr McGlone: Ceist uimhir a seacht, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member translate?

Mr McGlone: Sorry, Mr Speaker. You have not taken the Irish lessons yet. Question 7, a Cheann Comhairle — Mr Speaker.

7. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education, in relation to 'Learning to Learn — A Framework for Early Years', whether the proposal to introduce flexibility in overall enrolment for nursery schools and nursery units up to a maximum class size of 30 will be matched with an increased resource allocation. (AQO 3244/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question. I launched 'Learning to Learn — A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning' in December 2012. The proposed actions are the subject of focused consultation that concludes on 31 January 2013. I will consider the comments received during the consultation and their impact on the current proposals before finalising the way forward.

The framework proposes revising the preschool education programme to ensure that all target-age children benefit from an equitable preschool experience, including the introduction of flexibility in overall enrolment for nursery schools and nursery units in certain circumstances. It is proposed that nursery schools or nursery units in primary schools that are oversubscribed with target-age children will be able to apply for a temporary increase in their enrolment, if the additional children are all target age and the board of governors is satisfied that the premises and staffing structure can support the increase. Those who have approval to temporarily increase their enrolment will be allocated the relevant funding per pupil via the common funding formula under the local management of schools (LMS) arrangements.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thanks very much, Mr Speaker. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as ucht an fhreagra, agus b'fhéidir le tuilleadh eile eolais a chur leis. I want to ask for a wee bit more detail. I heard some of what the Minister said, so is he suggesting that it would be a better option to open additional units rather than to have additional places at existing hard-pressed facilities to make preschool education that bit easier for every child to access?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for the question. No, I am not suggesting that; I am saying that the general rule is that the money follows the pupil. So, if four additional preschool children are going into a unit, the funding will follow them. It is up to the school's board of governors to decide whether that is the best option. For example, do they have the staffing complement? Do they have the facilities for four more children? So, it is a decision for them. It is an option.

The other option exists in areas where there is a shortage of preschool places to bring forward a development proposal for a full unit of 26. However, if we are dealing with numbers in and around four, you are not going to get approval for an additional unit of 26, so there have to be economies of scale. I am putting that forward as an option. If schools want to take it up, I will facilitate them to do so if the consultation responses do not highlight something that we have not already thought about during the process.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give his assessment of how successful or maybe unsuccessful he has been in closing the gap in funding between statutory nursery provision

and those in the voluntary and community and private sectors?

Mr O'Dowd: If you want my assessment, I think that I have been very good at it. However, it is really up to others to make that assessment, including the Education Committee. We are beginning to narrow the gap in the funding that is available. Over the past number of years, we have increased funding to the voluntary and community sector to assist it in closing that gap. However, part of the new strategy also looks at the capacity and training available to community and voluntary settings and private settings to ensure that staff there can provide the most up-to-date curriculum, which is available to those in statutory settings. So, things are beginning to improve. I am sure that whether people are satisfied or not will depend on who you speak to.

3.30 pm

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Murder of Detective Garda Donohoe

Mr Speaker: Mr Conall McDevitt has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Justice. I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually — and I emphasise the word "continually" — in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be automatically called to ask a supplementary. I will then call other Members who are on their feet to ask a supplementary, taking into account the same issues as I do during Question Time. I also remind Members that, as there may be cross-border issues, they should be very careful not to say anything that might impact on any case that may come before the courts.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is not directly relevant to the question for urgent oral answer. When the junior Minister for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was answering questions, she intimated that she was going to group questions 3 and 11. It transpires that the person who was due to ask question 11 was not in their place. Is it in order for questions to be answered when a person is not in their place?

Mr Speaker: It is really an issue for the Minister. When questions are grouped, I expect Members to be in the House. On this occasion, that did not happen. There is sometimes a feeling that when a Member's question is down at number 10, 11 or 12 on the Order Paper, there is no need for them to come to the House because the Minister will probably not get to number 10, 11 or 12 anyway. That is totally and absolutely wrong and is certainly the wrong way to read the situation, because Members need to be aware that their question could be grouped a lot earlier. I remind the House that I expect Members whose questions might eventually be grouped to be in the House. We will move on.

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Justice what co-operation is taking place between criminal justice agencies North and South in response to the murder of Detective Garda Donohoe.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): First and foremost, I am sure that every Member of this House will wish to join me in utterly condemning

the senseless and callous murder of Detective Garda Adrian Donohoe. My thoughts are with his wife and family and with all his colleagues in an Garda Síochána. I spoke with my ministerial colleague Alan Shatter TD on Saturday to offer my condolences, and I was in touch with him again this morning. We are committed to working together against the criminal gangs and to protecting all our communities, North and South.

The police investigation is an operational matter. However, I know that the Chief Constable has spoken to the Garda Commissioner, Martin Callinan, and offered the assistance and full support of the PSNI for the investigation. Members will be aware that it is now an active and ongoing investigation in both jurisdictions.

Mr McDevitt: I join the Minister of Justice in condemning Garda Donohoe's murder. I ask the Minister to join me in calling on everyone in this part of Ireland who might be able to assist in and support the investigation to do the right thing and make sure that information is passed on either to the PSNI or to the Garda Síochána. I also ask him to join me in expressing solidarity with the members of an Garda Síochána — not least Garda Donohoe's widow, a serving officer, and his brothers, who are also serving officers — and members of the PSNI, especially the constable who, only this weekend, had to face up to a potential threat on his life.

Mr Ford: I have absolutely no difficulty in concurring with Mr McDevitt's sentiments. Any person in either jurisdiction on this island who has any information whatsoever that might help to catch perpetrators of this or any other serious crime has a duty to inform the PSNI, the Garda Síochána or an organisation such as Crimestoppers. As members of the PSNI are showing their solidarity with their colleagues in an Garda Síochána, I certainly wish to show my solidarity. Mr McDevitt correctly highlighted the fact that that was very much a family issue for the Donohoe family, and they will be suffering all the more because of that. On a number of occasions in my time as Minister, including in recent weeks, I have had to express solidarity to members of the PSNI because of what they have suffered from threats to their lives and from violence on the streets from different quarters. That solidarity is being shown between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána today, and I readily join myself and my Department in that expression of solidarity. The fight against terrorism and organised crime is a fight in which we are all united. That is clearly seen in the response of the PSNI to an Garda Síochána today, and the response that has

come from an Garda Síochána to the PSNI in the past.

Mr Givan: I join in the condemnation of this brutal act. I particularly think of the wife and the two young children who have been left without a father, something that many people in Northern Ireland, sadly, experienced throughout the darkest days of the Troubles. Given the reports that these serious organised crime gangs are moving from Dublin in particular and that some are residing in places such as Newry and Warrenpoint, what assurances can the Minister give to the House and to the public at large that Northern Ireland is not seen as a safe place for these individuals to reside and that every effort will be made to track them down?

Mr Ford: I echo the sentiments of my Committee Chair regarding our sympathy for the family of Garda Donohoe. He spoke specifically about crime gangs. At the meeting last week of the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) stakeholder group, there was a report of significant efforts being taken by the PSNI in conjunction with colleagues in an Garda Síochána and a number of other criminal justice agencies to disrupt, deter and dismember organised crime gangs. Sadly, the reality is that some of these crime gangs spread across every part of Europe, if not wider, but I have no doubt that we are seeing extremely good co-operation across the border and within the United Kingdom generally, which is assisting the PSNI in its role of dealing with these crime gangs, wherever they originate from.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht na bhfreagraí sin. I join colleagues in their words of condemnation, and, indeed, I offer condolences to the Donohoe family and his colleagues in an Garda Síochána. Does the Minister agree that this points up both the need and the value of co-operation across the island in dealing with serious crime?

Mr Ford: I echo the comments of the Committee Deputy Chair. Clearly, there is a significant need to co-operate across all the jurisdictions in these islands and beyond in the fight against serious organised crime. There is a particular and severe cross-border issue that directly affects us by the very fact that a land border makes it easier for people to operate than the water that separates us from other people. From the reports that I get through OCTF and the work that I see when I meet Alan Shatter through the intergovernmental agreement, there is no doubt that there is a lot of cross-border work going on. It is absolutely

clear that that requires the support of each and every one of us.

Mr Elliott: I add my sympathies to the family and colleagues of late Garda Donohoe. Given the need for good co-operation between criminal agencies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which the Minister has outlined, is it not vital that a criminal agency in Northern Ireland continues? Especially given that the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) is soon to disappear, will the UK National Crime Agency (NCA) operate in Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: First, we should take account of the words of sympathy that Mr Elliott has expressed, because that should surely be the focus of our discussions in answer to this question. I highlighted and will continue to highlight the good examples of co-operation on a North/South basis. There is also the need that we co-operate more widely. The current position is that agreement has not been reached about the full operation of the UK National Crime Agency that is due to be set up according to the Crime and Courts Bill and which will replace the Serious Organised Crime Agency in the devolved sphere. It will, of course, have powers to operate in the non-devolved sphere. What I am keen to see is that we should have such a body operating in a way that is fully accountable, in line with the policing architecture which exists in Northern Ireland and contributing to the fight against organised crime and such heinous crimes as human trafficking and child exploitation online.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Indeed, like others, I also join in the words of condolence to Garda Donohoe's family for this appalling act of criminality.

Reference has already been made to the National Crime Agency. Does the Minister agree with me that it is important that Northern Ireland sees a seamless transition from SOCA to that body in order to allow the full fight of crime to be delivered in Northern Ireland by the PSNI, by their colleagues in the rest of the United Kingdom and on a cross-border basis?

Mr Ford: Again, I note the references that my colleague makes to the appalling crime that we are discussing. It is vital that we join up law enforcement in the best possible way in each of the jurisdictions of these islands. In Northern Ireland, we have close cross-border and cross-channel interests. That is why I have regular meetings with the Home Office and the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice alongside the

Minister for Justice and Equality in Dublin. All of that is necessary, and I believe that it is vital that Northern Ireland should be joined to the appropriate UK agencies in the right way, just as we need to maintain the structures that we have for North/South co-operation.

Mr Allister: I join in condemning this foul murder and I welcome the fact that there is, in law enforcement, a better standard of co-operation between North and South, certainly than existed for decades when the IRA was murdering RUC officers in Northern Ireland and getting open-house treatment in the Republic. On the issue of the NCA, the Minister indicates disappointment at steps towards its introduction in Northern Ireland. Will he be clear? Who has vetoed the proposition for a legislative consent motion to enable the NCA to operate across the United Kingdom and within Northern Ireland? Is that in line with the maturity that we were promised with the devolution of policing and justice?

Mr Ford: I have already, to some extent, answered the points made by Mr Allister. I am not sure that even Mr Allister would expect me to reveal the confidences of an Executive meeting in this Chamber, although other people seem to have little difficulty in ensuring that leaks happen in other places.

I will restate my position. I put a paper to the Executive some months ago. Prior to that, I had considerable detailed discussions with the Home Secretary in which I sought to ensure that appropriate arrangements were made that would enable the NCA to operate in Northern Ireland, taking account of our policing architecture, respecting the primacy of the PSNI and ensuring that there was a role for the Police Ombudsman and others. Following discussions with other colleagues, I put further recommendations to the Home Secretary before Christmas, as to amendments that might be made to her proposals. I regret to say that there were requests for other proposals that I did not feel that I could put to the Home Secretary because I did not believe that they would have left the NCA as a viable operation to support the work of the PSNI in the way that I believe is absolutely vital.

Mr Speaker: The House may take its ease as we move into the next piece of business.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Local Government: Review of Public Administration

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected, and it has been published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose his amendment and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

3.45 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the significant workload and substantial costs involved in the delivery of the Executive's local government reform transition as proposed under the review of public administration; believes that the Executive should provide financial support for the reform process, including for future rates convergence; and calls on the Executive to provide financial support to councils to cover the upfront costs of RPA, which yield no short-term savings, and to ensure that these costs do not result in rate increases.

I propose the motion on behalf of the SDLP. On the day that is in it, and knowing that the Minister is just back from Ballymena, where he joined in the celebrations of awarding the freedom of the city to Liam Neeson, I suggest that he might use these words to his Executive colleagues:

"I don't have any money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills; skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you."

I know that the Minister has, over a number of months, indeed, over the past two years, tabled papers to the Executive and attempted to table them a number of times, much to the dismay of some of his ministerial colleagues. He eventually got them tabled last week, and they call for money for the reform of local

government. As Members will know, the SDLP is the only party that did not support a four-year Budget that did not allow for any funding for the review of public administration (RPA). Therefore, it is very cynical and hypocritical of many parties at local council level, particularly those who are double-jobbers, to commiserate with their local council colleagues about the burden that will be put on local ratepayers because the Executive have failed thus far to make any promises on funding.

I believe that, when the Executive got over their hiccups around the Boundary Commission report, they finally agreed in November 2011 that the 11-council model would be going full steam ahead. When that agreement came, it was a surprise, because it was primarily an agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP that there would be an 11-council model. The funding guidelines agreed by the Executive at that time were, first, that the implementation costs associated with reform would not be met by central government. Consequently, local government will be required to bear those costs. Secondly, functions that are to transfer from central government to local government should be fit for purpose, sufficiently funded and cost-neutral to the ratepayer at the point of transfer. This would require the transfer of resources from central to local government when the functions transfer. I do not believe that any of us could fault that principle. However, we in the SDLP and, I believe, others, at least a local council level, have trouble accepting the first one.

I know that, in the past number of monitoring rounds, the Minister has bid, with no success unfortunately, for some of the transition costs to be met. Those transition costs are estimated to be in the region of £38 million. I understand that those costs will have no benefit to the local council. Others will remember the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report that talked about upfront costs of £118 million over a five-year period but over £240-odd million savings over a 25-year period. Some of us could agree and accept that some of the savings that could be realised at local council level over the longer term could be funded, whether through local government funding or a loan from central government in the short term. However, many Members will not accept at local council level that the £38 million costs should be borne entirely by the local ratepayer.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member has, at various levels, expressed scepticism at the figures produced in the PwC report. I point out that, to be fair to PwC, the reference was £420 million, not £240 million.

The Member seemed to get the figures the wrong way round.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you for that. There are too many figures in the RPA debate, perhaps.

Some Members at Committee level and others attempt to suggest that the whole process has been slowed down. Anyone looking objectively at the work that needs to be done to make RPA happen will acknowledge the fact that there is a substantial amount of work to done. Indeed, the regional transition committees are meeting, and I understand that they have drawn up an implementation plan of some 140 recommendations that have yet to be realised. So, it is a huge amount of work. Of course, the Secretary of State also has a role in so far as she has to appoint a commissioner for the district electoral wards. That is supposed to be completed by the end of this year. There is a huge amount of work to be done, but the cost to the ratepayer is something that we are very concerned about. That concern is one that our colleagues at local councils share.

I will highlight some of the costs. There are costs around ICT, for example, and the design of websites, and of having systems in place that will meet the needs of new services being devolved, as well as the standardisation of services across local councils. There are also the costs of a change manager and of transition. Of course, there are savings to be made over the longer term, with fewer staff at the top, fewer directors and fewer chief executives. There are also the severance costs for local councils.

On behalf of the SDLP, I put on record our support for and acknowledgement of the many people in all the parties throughout the North who, over some very difficult times, stood up to those who were opposed to democracy. Many of them made the ultimate sacrifice; they lost their life.

There are also costs that have to be considered in relation to the establishment of new headquarters and where they are going to be. There are also associated costs with looking at the procedures, policies and harmonisation of some of the backroom services around finance, HR and payroll. There is also a lot of work to be done around the community-planning initiative and capacity building for staff and officers. The Committee for the Environment recently found, and has been looking at, the training budgets that are in existence across the district councils, so that they can be used now rather than a cost being put on central government in that preparation. Even at that,

those budgets would not meet the requirements of the work that is needed for the capacity building that will allow the reform to take place over the longer term.

There are also some assurances. Hopefully, the Minister will restate his commitment to ensuring that the safeguards and protections in equality rights across all local councils are resolved and are put in place long before the new councils are formed. We also want to look at the principle of the shadow councils and the preparation that has to be done for those elections. That will demand considerable thought, particularly in relation to some of the functions that will be given to those shadow councils and the decisions that they can make.

There is, of course, a lot of concern across the business sector about rates convergence and the debates to be had and the decisions to be made around assets and liabilities. The DUP amendment acknowledges some of the sentiment of the motion, but, unfortunately, it does not ask the Executive to meet any of the upfront costs. I do not believe that that is something that we can accept. We are very clear —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will, but I have very little time.

Mr Allister: The Member makes a strong argument for the provision of funding. Can she help me, however? If the DUP/Sinn Féin block holds its line on this and the funding is not forthcoming, should RPA reform go ahead? Or, is she saying that, without the funding, it cannot, and should not, go ahead?

Mrs D Kelly: I do not think that there is any choice in the matter, as Sinn Féin and the DUP have made it very clear that RPA will go ahead. A substantial amount of work has been done already, and that is something that I was trying to outline in my opening remarks.

There is an expectation that RPA will go ahead. I understood that the rationale was to have better service delivery and more effective local reform.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP will not shy away from that. We urge that, whatever work and savings can be accrued under the ICE scheme, it should be full steam ahead with that regardless of the time frame.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "administration;" and insert

"recognises that local government will be the beneficiary of the savings that result from reform; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to engage with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on financing reform and, in particular, on the issue of rates convergence with the aim of developing a solution that does not result in rate increases."

I listened to Minister Ford's response to a question from Mr Allister, when he said that he would not reveal Executive confidences. I felt that Mrs Kelly skirted very close to revealing Executive deliberations, although, of course, she is not a member of the Executive — at least, not yet, anyway. *[Laughter.]* There is, potentially, still time.

I would never seek to speak for everybody in the House. However, at least we have, by and large, moved forward in our debates on the review of public administration from discussions about whether it should or will happen to discussions about how it should be funded because it is happening. That is, at least, a crumb of comfort —

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I have hardly even started to make an argument. I will give way.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to my colleague from Strangford for giving way. A question that I asked the Finance Minister last week comes to mind. He quite clearly said that Mr Attwood was asking for far too much and that savings from the reform of public administration would cover everything; there would be no expense to the ratepayer. That is our concern.

Mr Hamilton: I thought for a second that the Member was making my argument for me and would save the House eight minutes. Let me come to that point in time. I will build up to that and address the Member's point in due course.

For me, the review of public administration was not just about savings, monetary benefits or better service provision in the longer term. First, it was about having powers at the appropriate local level. Who is better placed to take decisions on planning, regeneration and local economic and tourism development than councillors? I agree with Mrs Kelly's comments. I have heard the Minister talk about how, in the past, it was a bulwark for democracy when

there was a democratic deficit in Northern Ireland and commend the sterling work of councillors down through the years. There is no better place for that. It is the appropriate place for power to be on issues that affect local communities.

Secondly, it was always about local government's potential to deliver more, maybe not at the outset but over time. It has a unique capacity. On the mainland, councils can borrow because they are not in central government. They can borrow in a way that does not score against the public sector balance sheet and deliver on some of those issues, particularly regeneration. In city and county councils throughout England, Scotland and Wales, local authorities are making huge investments because of the way in which they are structured and can be financed. There is huge potential to do that in Northern Ireland with bigger, more ambitious councils, bigger rate bases and a greater ability to pay for those sorts of schemes. It is about power at the appropriate level and local government's longer-term potential.

Obviously, it is also about benefits and savings. Undoubtedly, there are costs, which we acknowledge. A tremendous amount of work is being done, as we speak, to make RPA happen. It is now some 800 to 900 days until it happens, so you would expect work to be ongoing. The work that is going on will be partly on the transitional issues that Mrs Kelly mentioned and partly on building towards the savings and monetary benefits that are undoubtedly there, which are the bedrock and foundation of why we are going forward with RPA. It is worth making the point, as the amendment does, that those savings will be reaped at local government rather than central government level. Forgive me for using, as I will probably continue to do, the phrases "local government" and "central government". That, understandably, raises division and a them-and-us type of mentality. It is not intentional, just a reflection of reality and useful terminology for the debate. The savings will be reaped at local rather than central level. I will correct Mrs Kelly and my colleague Mr Weir: the PwC report stated that, for £118 million investment, a benefit of £428 million would be reaped over a 25-year period. We can debate whether that figure is right and extrapolate from when the report was done to now, but it is clear that there is a significant magnitude of savings to be had if the RPA is done right. If there is collaboration on ICT, procurement, shared services, waste management, finance and property services, there is huge potential for savings, not on a

one-off but on an ongoing basis moving forward.

4.00 pm

Mrs Kelly mentioned two key principles that I agree with, and I jotted those down in my notes. The first is that, when functions and responsibilities are transferred from central government, they are properly resourced. I think that everybody in the House agrees with that, and that should be done. Some of the costs that she talked about may be better funded on or before transfer, but that is getting down to the nitty-gritty of how you would fund it. The second key principle, which was adopted by the Executive last year, is that they would not pay the upfront costs. It would be a matter for local government to pay on the basis that it would be the beneficiary of the savings in the longer term. If there are to be upwards of £400-odd million of savings over a longer period and into the future, the argument that local government should pay the costs is reasonable. We can argue about what happens in the final analysis. That is obviously what the debate is about, but that is a reasonable position for the Executive to adopt. Why should central government pay for something that local government will benefit from? I say that knowing full well that, even though we talk about central government and local government, we are still talking about the same ratepayers. A different pound of the same ratepayer's money will pay for the reform, whether central government ponies up the money or local government pays for it. It is the same public money. It may come from two different pots in terms of how we define it within the totality of government, but the same ratepayer's pound will pay for it; it will just come out of different pockets. It is reasonable that those who benefit from it should pay for it or at least pay for most of it. Now we are in a position in which, because of the campaign, an expectation has developed that central government will pay for some of it. That has led to a delay on the part of some councils in moving forward on some of their work. It is being embraced by some in local government — I do not necessarily mean elected Members — as a reason to put up against —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way very briefly.

Mrs D Kelly: I will be brief. Does the Member not accept that, in GB and the South of Ireland, central government put up money for the reform

of local government? Why should we be different?

Mr Hamilton: I will move on to my final points, which deal with that.

Our amendment encourages dialogue between the Minister and his colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel. He smirks at me across the Chamber — I will not reveal any confidences. Dialogue, if you can call it that, has already commenced. Even today, there have, I understand, been attempts to organise further dialogue. Who could disagree with the two relevant Ministers having dialogue with colleagues around the Executive table? I do not think that anybody could disagree with that. In that dialogue, they should seek solutions and not solely solutions based on shovelling money from central government into local government. We need to look at borrowing, the use of reserves and whether there are other, better ways than a simple transfer of funds from central government to local government.

We need to build from the basis of an accurate assessment of costs. It is no secret that the two Ministers disagree on the Minister of the Environment's assessment of the costs of transition. Both Ministers have commented on that publicly. So we need an accurate assessment of the costs and some agreement on that assessment. The Ministers then need to look at what the appropriate solutions are. They could include some financial support, money from central government, borrowing, the use of reserves or some other means. When agreed, those solutions should be implemented. That is a reasonable way forward. The encouragement of dialogue to find an accurate assessment and appropriate solutions to the problem is eminently sensible, instead of us getting up as legislators in the House and acceding to the principle that we will just provide all the money, even though there may be better ways. Moving forward, that is a sensible and sound policy. So let us get an accurate assessment of the costs, determine the best way of funding them and move forward on the basis of sensible, sound solutions that are affordable and appropriate. I do not think that anybody in the House would disagree — I hope that that is the case — with the need for dialogue between the Ministers to hollow out this situation and, to use one of the Minister's favourite words, interrogate the costs that he himself has put forward. I think that that is sensible, right and appropriate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Hamilton: I encourage the House to embrace and support the amendment.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an mholta seo.

I support the motion. I just want to say a few words on the amendment. I agree with some aspects of the Member's argument, such as encouraging the Ministers to come forward. However, until now it has, unfortunately, been a case of "Yes", "No", "I don't want to" and "You're not getting anything". We had that in Committee after we asked for information a number of times. I had hoped that the Member would expand more on the amendment. The amendment refers only to the rates issue, but a lot of others need to be addressed.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Hamilton: I did not have enough time, so I will try to steal a bit from you. You are right: the amendment talks about:

"financing reform and, in particular, ... the issue of rates convergence"

I think that there will be agreement right across the House that there is the potential to change some council areas, that the amalgamation of councils will be an issue and that there is a need to find solutions that do not penalise the ratepayer. The totality of that is financing reform and, in particular and as I will stress, rates convergence.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for putting across his point of view. The amendment could be read in a way that means that it refers to the rates issue alone. It could be interpreted in that way.

I want to get down to the reality of the situation. We have been talking about this for a long time. We now have a situation where a lot of councils, councillors and council officials do not know exactly what is happening. The time frame that had been set has moved on. I would like the Minister to touch on where we are with the time frame and on what we as a Committee and the Assembly can do to bring this forward.

I want to pick up on a few points about the costs. Three or four years ago, PwC brought forward a report in which it said that the upfront costs would be £118 million. I do not know whether any more work has been done on the

actual costs, so perhaps the Minister could indicate what they will be.

There was talk in the Committee about whether the initial business case and the request for moneys stacked up and were robust. The Minister now has a chance on the Floor of the House to bring forward his plans. In Committee, as a member of Sinn Féin, I have supported central government coming forward with at least some of the costs. I support the case for that for the likes of the transition management teams, capacity building, staff redundancy packages, related ICT systems and convergence — any of the things that do not generate any savings or efficiencies. I know that the Member who moved the amendment said that local authorities would benefit from some of those things and that a lot of savings could be generated from them. However, that is not the case for the issues that I highlighted, as they are starting costs. I would certainly support the Minister if he brought that forward as part of his business case.

I want to talk about two other issues related to what local councils have done. I know that NILGA has been very forthright in its views to the Committee. I have to say that councillors and local authorities can bring forward a proper package of reform, because they deal with this issue on the ground. I know that some MLAs are still councillors and are still dealing with that. I have left my council now, and I have not seen exactly how it is operating as much as I did when I was a councillor. However, NILGA in particular makes a good argument for costs, and I would like to see that argument supported.

I want to talk about one other issue. There seems to be a lot of steer on what the ICE programme can generate. Can the Minister talk about how that programme will bring rewards? I recognise that they will be more mid- to long-term rewards, not now generated up front. I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the debate. Over the past year, I have had several discussions with the Minister about these very issues, not only about RPA in general but the associated costs. I put those costs into three main areas. One is the upfront transition costs for RPA. Secondly, there are the rates convergence costs, which are more significant to some councils than others. There are some groupings for which those costs will not be as significant, but there are others where they will have a huge impact on ratepayers. The third area is the cost of the transfer of functions. I know that the Minister has said that the cost of transferring functions

will be cost-neutral at the point of transfer. To me, that does not go far enough. I will deal with that point first. When the functions are transferred, a proper mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure that they will be cost-neutral for the foreseeable future to the area's ratepayers. That will mean some sort of organisational decision taken between local councils and whatever Department that function is being transferred from — be it Planning Service in DOE or wherever — on how much it costs at the moment. There needs to be a rebalancing of the local rate and the regional rate to reflect that and to ensure that those functions will not be an additional burden on the ratepayer for some time to come.

Coming from Fermanagh, I can say that rates convergence is a massive issue. You will hear later from my colleague Ross Hussey about the Omagh council area, but there is a massive difference between the current rates there and the current debt. Those are not the only areas where there will be significant problems. I return to the old difficulty: why are we putting some areas together when they do not want to go together and would be much better suited to some grouping other than the one that they are being put into? I cannot understand why Dundonald will be with the Lisburn/Castlereagh grouping rather than with Belfast.

Like Mr Hamilton and others, I am not on the Executive and so am not privy to the details, but I hear rumours, some of which suggest that rates convergence costs could be up to £30 million in one-off costs. I am happy for the Minister to confirm, deny or make no comment, but I am only reflecting some of what I am hearing.

We had the PwC report on the overall transition costs. From my knowledge, that is the only report that gives a reasonable indication of what the upfront costs will be. It stated £118 million, but the report has been questioned, as has the point in it that states that there will be £428 million of savings over 25 years. That figure has been questioned very strongly. I am disappointed that there has not been an update at this stage. We have been told for some time that there was to be an update to the PwC report. I ask the Minister to let us know in more detail what the more up-to-date proposals, suggestions or considerations are, because we need to know. I understand that there is some sort of template for councils to populate so that they can get some idea of how accurate that £118 million figure for costs is.

The DUP amendment mentions ongoing dialogue between the Minister of the

Environment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I would appreciate it if I heard from the Minister what ongoing dialogue there has been, how useful it was and whether there have been positive outcomes. I am well aware of the huge costs. Mrs Kelly talked about the cost of information technology —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Elliott: — but there is also redundancy for senior officers, the amalgamation of councils, the winding up of old councils and the ongoing upkeep of ICT.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Elliott: There are huge costs, and I would like to hear from the Minister some of the exact details.

4.15 pm

Ms Lo: As an Alliance MLA, I support the motion, although not without reservations. I welcome the DUP amendment as I believe it is not the responsibility of the Environment Minister alone to implement local government reform. Other Ministers need to work with him to come up with a way forward, taking into account realistic costings and a time frame.

I had a recent meeting with NILGA members who expressed grave concerns about the lack of progress on finance, transfer of functions, delivery of legislation, a severance scheme for councillors and redundancy payments for senior council staff. There is a great urgency to clarify those issues, particularly on financing the reform, to avoid inertia in local government. We heard of a request for £39.5 million being submitted to the Executive by the Environment Minister and saw monitoring round bids rejected on several occasions. It is about time that Ministers sat round a table to sort out the process.

There is serious uncertainty among councillors across Northern Ireland — in all parties, I believe — about whether the reform is now viable. That this concern exists so late in the process is surely due to overcomplexity and programme slippage. For example, we have a political reference group, transitional committees taking various forms and shadow councils — all while the current councils continue to exist. Any member of the public listening to this will view that as unnecessarily wasteful and complicated.

The timescale set by the Department is already being missed in a number of areas, not least the timetabling of the local government reorganisation Bill itself. It is astonishing that we do not yet have even a commissioner to draw the district electoral area boundaries, just two months before they are due to be drawn. With slippage now likely, what happens if there is a judicial review of boundaries that have already been drawn late? Of significant concern to me is the confusion that that causes to staff, the most obvious victims of this very complex process. People have a right to know what changes they will face in their duties, their location of work, their pay and their colleagues. What guidance are they being given? Why does it seem to vary from council to council? What on earth is all this uncertainty doing to morale?

Ultimately, the Executive need to answer this simple question: if there are so many substantial costs associated with local government reform, why are we proceeding with it? To be clear, the ratepayer will end up paying the costs regardless of whether they are met by the Executive or councils. Until the end of 2012, we were promised a reform that would be cost-efficient, and, on that basis, my party backed it. Why then, at the start of 2013, are there now substantial costs and no hint of concrete savings, even in the long term? If there is a case for meeting the costs for long-term gain it needs to be made, and quickly. Otherwise, this will rapidly descend into another example of the Executive failing to deliver on their pledges. I share NILGA's determination to avoid assigning blame, but the process has become entangled in bureaucracy, harmed by miscommunication and seemingly far more expensive than initially envisaged.

I wish to raise a final point beyond finances, on which my party's enthusiasm for the process may depend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Lo: Good relations need to be central to the reform. Councils should have CSI schemes, with models set out by the Department, including some of the complex issues around symbols, shared space and so on.

Lord Morrow: I listened intently to Dolores Kelly — I see she has gone. She started off her remarks by again attacking her leader on the double-jobbing issue. I would have thought that the SDLP would discuss that at its party meetings and try to sort those things out there,

rather than bringing it to the Floor of the Assembly. Anyway, that is the way that she decides to do things.

Local government reform has been on the agenda for longer than some of us may care to remember. We should keep it in our minds, as we go through this process, that this is not the first time. Maybe we can learn something from how it was done in the past. This is not the first time that we have had to go through local government reform. Some of us have been about long enough to remember when local government was reformed before, under the Macrory report back in 1973. Quite frankly, I do not think that it stood half the debate, discussion, manoeuvring, manipulation, diving and ducking that we are seeing around this whole issue of local government.

It strikes me that there are those who are involved in local government reform — allegedly — who are not that enthusiastic about the whole process and would prefer it if something else was happening. That seems to influence what they are going to do or, more importantly, what they are not going to do. One thing that needs to be spelt out loud and clear. The Minister has an opportunity to do that today, but I suspect that he will not take that opportunity. Why? Because I have listened to him so many times in the past, and he is ambiguous on these issues. The model of reforming local government that is before the House and local government is not the one that he wants. Therefore, if it has to go, it will go at a snail's pace, and I suspect that it will be dragged out across the time. Others have intimated that there is a strong possibility that local government reform will not happen during this term of the Assembly. I happen to be in that camp. The Minister has the opportunity today to dispel all of that and to say that, come fair or foul wind or weather, local government reform will go ahead.

I heard Tom Elliott. He is going back to a day in the past when he says that this is not the way to go. We can decide that this is the way to go and the decisions have been made and the battles fought and lost or won. We need to start to take local government reform forward.

I was a bit disappointed in Anna Lo, who said that she was going to support the motion. I direct her attention to the amendment, which seeks to go to the very heart and kernel of the matter: rates convergence. Some might say that it is easy for me to talk. I should maybe declare that I am a member of a local council. The local council I am a member of will be joining with Cookstown and Magherafelt.

Those councils have a lot of things in common, not least the rates base that they are all going to come from. That is because, as everybody should know, Dungannon council is the only council in Northern Ireland that has not increased its rates over the past three years. I will not try to guess what it will do next year, because that would be unfair. I just say, "Keep watching this space". You will find that it will do the responsible thing again as far as its ratepayers are concerned — oh, that others would take stock. However, I am glad to see that Belfast City Council has now cottoned on to what Dungannon is doing, and they think it is a good idea. I see that they have made certain proposals that would not be out of keeping with what Dungannon is doing.

Let us hear from the Minister today a clear, unambiguous statement that local government reform will go ahead and that he is determined to take it forward. To date, he has not shown that determination, and that is one of the issues that is holding back this whole process. I would like to hear the Minister also tell us that the transition committees —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Lord Morrow: — are going to be statutory. For too long, they have not been in that position. I hope that the Minister will change that by his statement today.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. It is important that RPA goes ahead this time. The RPA issue has been running for some years. It started off under direct rule and has been a real gravy train since. The first few people involved in it basically toured the world looking for alternatives and did not find them. They came back, and we are still in the same situation.

Savings have been talked about today — including the amendment — particularly and mainly savings to local government. First, there is nothing to say that there will be any savings at all. Secondly, if there are any savings, there is nothing to say that they will be only to local government. At the end of the day, local and regional rates come from the same ratepayers.

It is important that we analyse the alleged savings. The PWC report was disputed, questioned and dismissed by most people at that time. We then had ICE, which came particularly from people who could not get their own transition committees together — in Fermanagh, Omagh and such places, where

we had difficulty getting them to put together proposals just for transition. Yet, they had a proposal for how everybody else right across the 26 councils could make savings. So we need to ask whether, even under ICE, there will be any real savings at the end of the day. Councils will also be taking up new roles. We cannot just stand still. If we are going to give local government more powers, we need to give it the flexibility to develop and grow to take on new roles and to finance those new roles. It is important that the Executive or central government finance RPA at this early stage because we do not know what savings may or may not occur. That process should be funded directly from the block grant and not by local ratepayers, who do not at present see any benefits from paying for this at local government level.

We have to question whether local government will even benefit. Hopefully, a number of different powers will be transferred to local government, but there is no guarantee that the resources will follow those new powers. So, it is important to recognise the new roles that local government will be taking on and to clearly indicate to everyone what they will be, who will pay for them and where we go from there.

Of course dialogue should happen. I thought that it already was happening in the Executive, which is where two Ministers should be sitting down and having discussions. That is part of their roles, but it takes two to tango in that situation. I do not know who is not participating, but whoever it is needs to get into it and get this sorted out. In any other circumstances, if we want to sort out a budget, we go and ask and we get it sorted.

There is talk about this not bringing about rate increases. I was going to give the example that Lord Morrow gave of my former council, Dungannon — I am no longer a member of it — as one of the councils that have held their rate at a 0% increase for the past three years. That is because we are moving into transition across Cookstown and Magherafelt. We also worked in the transition committees to get the other two councils to work along the same lines. All three councils have taken down their rates increases. I believe —

4.30 pm

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, under the process, there are more issues than just the rates issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Molloy: I do agree. The rates increases and convergence is one issue. I believe that if the councils that are amalgamating had been working together for the past number of years in transition committees, a lot of the problems could have been sorted out. A lot of the convergence could have been balanced out. In our situation, we could look at how we could work across the three councils so we could reduce costs and charges and, in that way, start to create convergence across the three areas. If you just sit and wait until the last minute and hope that somebody will pay for it all at the finish, it will not happen.

The big thing is that RPA has been going on for so many years that we need to give certainty to council staff, councillors and everyone in the area about what is going to happen in the future. Is it going to happen or is it not? We need to send out a very clear message: it is going to happen. As to whether or not we need transition through shadow councils, I do not know whether that serves any real purpose or just becomes another delaying tactic. It will create confusion, costs and charges. Who is going to pay for that? As I said, we need to give certainty to council staff and councillors. Many of those people have put their life on hold for the past 15 years, waiting to see what would actually happen. They did not know whether the councils were going to be wound up in one particular year, whether they were going to get a severance package or what was going to happen in the future. It is very important that we give certainty.

I do not believe that the amendment is necessary. What the amendment says is what should be happening anyway. We need a strong voice, coming from across all parties in the Assembly, to say that we need to get this sorted out and need to give support to it. It is not just a rates issue. It is right across the board, covering the various aspects of charging and costs within councils. Let us work towards the savings that may actually happen —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Molloy: I do not believe that the savings are there, at this point.

Mr Wells: I rise as someone who has had perhaps a unique experience of local government in Northern Ireland, in that I am the only person ever to have sat on three different

district councils. I was first elected to Lisburn Borough Council in 1981, for Moira. Moira was moved out of South Down, so I moved to Banbridge. Banbridge was moved out of South Down, so then I moved to Ballynahinch. Guess what? Ballynahinch was moved out of South Down. I think that they were trying to move me, rather than the district council. That is the reason for my somewhat nomadic existence as a district councillor, which goes back over 30 years. I retired from Down District Council at the last local government elections.

Serving on three very different types of council — one a large, almost metropolitan council; one a very quiet, peaceful, rural town; one a much more divided council, in the form of Down council — has given me an insight into the workings of local authorities in the Province. I have to be honest: if you were to ask the vast majority of district councillors in Northern Ireland, you would find that there is not a great deal of enthusiasm for RPA. I have to be absolutely honest and say that. Indeed, there is an argument that many councils have, over the past 40 years, formed an identity for themselves, worked together and generally served their communities very well. I suggest that most councillors, and, indeed, a lot of the public, are not that enthusiastic about the whole process. If you were to ask the average man on the street what he feels his most important priorities are, you would be very lucky if RPA appeared in the top 50. However, we have to accept that we are where we are and a decision has been made, but if that decision does not lead to greater efficiency and cost savings, it really is a bit of a nonsense. Therefore, I was quite shocked to hear Mr Molloy say that he believes there is the potential for no savings to be made. If there are no savings to be made, frankly, why are we going down this route? The councils must be more efficient, or else RPA will have been an utterly fruitless exercise.

One thing I think that we are all agreed on is that there has been a huge element of doubt hanging over our 26 local councils for the best part of a decade. We must have clarity from the Minister today. Recently, I was at a meeting of district councillors in Antrim, and there was a perception that RPA may not go ahead at all. It will all go live in only 14 months' time, yet I get no sense whatsoever from the Minister or from those in the local government division of DOE that there is any urgency that reform is coming very quickly. There are lots of i's to be dotted and t's to be stroked, and we are not seeing it happen.

If the Minister has doubts about the process and wishes to put it off, he needs to tell the

Assembly. People need to know what they are doing because many councillors are hanging on. Some wish to retire, and some need to retire. Others are keen to come into the new authorities and are holding on, expecting to take on new roles; yet for many of them, there is still confusion about where they stand, particularly when it is proposed to hand planning over to the new authorities.

I have to be honest, from my experience of three councils over a 31-year period, I do not believe that the present cohort of councillors or prospective new councillors are adequately equipped to take on planning. For years, they could call for the sun, the moon and the stars and, if they did not get it, they could blame the local Planning Service officer. Councillors have got themselves into a mentality of backing every application, whether or not it has any merit, knowing full well that they do not have responsibility for taking a decision and that if a decision goes against them, they can castigate a local planning officer to the high heavens in their local newspaper when, privately, they will often have told the Planning Service officer that they really agree with what he or she is doing but that they cannot do so publicly. I do not see those district councils having the wherewithal to take on the responsibility. They will have to exercise discretion. They are going to have to say no to every application for apartments and to a large number of applications for single dwellings in the countryside. That requires a maturity that, at the moment, they have not been trained for and have no experience of, yet we still see that level of doubt.

I hope that, at the end of the debate, we will have achieved one thing. We may not have more money for local government to fund this massive change, but at least everyone who leaves the Chamber and the 500-odd councillors in Northern Ireland will know where they stand.

Mr Hussey: I was disappointed that I did not follow Mr Molloy because he supported the 15-council model, and he supported it very well. I also supported the 15-council model. Lord Morrow referred to ducking and diving. I still believe that we should have followed the 15-council model. I took some notes during the debate, and the words "accurate costs" were mentioned several times. No one seems to know how much RPA is going to cost local government or central government. Will central government give any money at all? We have potential Ministers Mrs Kelly and Mr Hamilton advising us that they will be Ministers in the near future and may be able to change it all

about. Maybe, Mrs Kelly, when this is over, you will be able to tell us what is actually happening.

Some comments have totally baffled me. We will have a situation in which local councils will be allowed to borrow. I do not know much, but I know that if you borrow money, you are expected to pay it back at a rate of interest. Who is going to pay that rate of interest, or does it just disappear? There will clearly be a charge on ratepayers, wherever they are.

My colleague Tom Elliott referred to the Omagh/Fermanagh scenario. That scenario was obviously designed by Baldrick and Captain Blackadder because nobody gave any thought to it, and it clearly will not work. They are not happy about it in the Tyrone and Fermanagh areas, yet they are being forced together: come in, Dungannon, we know your knock but we are not going to increase your rates. The suggestion, therefore, is that Dungannon is more than capable of doing its job so we should leave it alone. Dungannon, Cookstown, Magherafelt and other councils are doing wonderful jobs. I had the honour of being a member of Omagh District Council for six years, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there.

Mr Wells referred to the powers that will be devolved to the new councils. Will councillors be able to accept the responsibilities that will be devolved to them? We do not know because they do not yet have those responsibilities. We do not know the job descriptions for new councillors. We do not know the rate of pay. We do not know anything.

This plan is like going to bake a cake without having eggs or sugar. When you buy a car, you know how much it will cost and whether you can afford it. In this scenario, we are being asked to buy a car without knowing whether it has four tyres, windscreen wipers or lights, but this has to go ahead. Why?

Mr Weir: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Hussey: I beg your pardon?

RPA was a nonsense. This will not work. Local government? There is nothing local about this. This is a dirty deal between you and Sinn Féin, and you are trying to force this through. You even admit that other councillors do not want it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Hussey: Councillors from all parties do not want this deal. So why are we going ahead

with it? Are there to be no costs? Well, perhaps we can hide them somewhere and get them out of the rates. It is a nonsense to suggest that it is the same money. It is not the same money. If you increase the rates in Omagh or Fermanagh, it is the ratepayers there who will have to pay them. There is no less money coming in here. That is a nonsense. You have not persuaded me at all.

Mr Hamilton: Who is paying it?

Mr Hussey: I beg your pardon? If you want to interrupt and ask me a question, I will happily give way to you.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. Who, ultimately, is paying for it? That is the point. If the money is coming from taxpayers, those are the same people who pay rates.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Hussey: It is the same money as has always come here from central government. It comes from the British Government. The rates will go to councils, and the rates will be paid by the ratepayer. That is the way it will be.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hussey: No, not just yet. The ratepayer will pay. Do not believe any of this nonsense that the ratepayer is not going to pay. The ratepayer is paying for RPA, and that is what will be proposed.

Mrs D Kelly: The ratepayers in Craigavon will not be paying the same amount for expenditure and excess as is paid by ratepayers in the Belfast City Council area, for example.

Mr Hussey: Belfast City Council is a prime example of gerrymandering, if I were ever to use such a word. I will not do that in case I offend somebody. We know where we are, and we know that this will not work. It is a nonsense from the start.

I will support the SDLP motion, but I do not know where you lot in the DUP are coming from.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If I may pick up on Mr Hussey's driving analogy, we are probably due for an MOT.

I support the motion proposed by my party colleagues. We have been told about the potential long-term savings that may flow from the reorganisation of local government. Whether that happens remains to be seen, but with the transfer of powers for the various services involved, it will be the responsibility of the new councils to deliver those savings while maintaining and improving on current levels of service.

The powers that are currently — I emphasise the word "currently" — being proposed for transfer include planning from the Department of the Environment (DOE); urban regeneration from the Department for Social Development (DSD); local economic development and tourism from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI); part of the responsibility for roads from the Department for Regional Development (DRD); local sports facilities from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); and rural development from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). It is also proposed that councils have a new statutory duty of community planning and a new power of promoting well-being.

Equality must be the cornerstone of any reform of local government, even one as delayed as this. Mr Hussey referred to gerrymandering.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes, I will.

Mrs D Kelly: I just want to support the Member's point on equality. He will recall well that my former colleague the late Sean McKavanagh had to take a case against Craigavon Borough Council in relation to the provision of services to the GAA.

Mr McGlone: I remember it well. The late Mr McKavanagh was a highly esteemed member of our party and well respected in the local community. He took that case on the principle of equality for all because of the discrimination taking place in Craigavon Borough Council at that time.

Equality must be the cornerstone of any reform of local government, even one as delayed as this. In the transfer of the various proposed powers to the new councils, equality of treatment must be enshrined in the legislation put before the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I cannot give way at the moment, Lord Morrow, I have more to say.

Be it gerrymandering or whatever, it is too important an issue to be left to the interpretation of any council's "new ethical standards regime".

4.45 pm

I will give you two recent headline reasons and figures for why that is the case. The names "Red Sky" and "Girdwood" spring out at us as examples of where political interference, rather than the paramountcy of good practice and equality, became the issue. We have to have that paramountcy, particularly in planning. Planning is one of the key issues and cornerstones of equality for all of us. That is before we even move into the area of housing, where we know that there have been attempts at interference. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members not to speak from a sedentary position. You may continue.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I have more to say, so I will continue.

Even before we see the legislation, we can see that equality of treatment in the new councils is being put at risk. The SDLP's Minister has repeatedly put forward proposals for the Executive to provide local government with financial assistance for the reform process. Other Executive parties have repeatedly refused his requests. The most recent refusal came during the January monitoring round. That bid covered a major part of the Budget period up to 2015 and comprised tens of millions of pounds.

The Minister has made it clear that upfront money and soft loans later, as well as help with rates convergence from 2015, are justified and necessary to protect ratepayers. By refusing to provide the necessary financial support for the reform process, the Executive are effectively leaving those councils hamstrung before they have even come into existence. Without the Executive's support, it is our constituents who will bear the impact of the upfront cost of reform. Mr Hussey referred to that. Whether through rates increases or cuts in services, they will pay the price for the Executive's failure. By short-changing the new councils now, the Executive are pressurising them into taking shortcuts with their delivery in the future. It is the most disadvantaged in our society —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr McGlone: No; I thought that I had another minute.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, we have a limit, and we must go to the Minister. The Clerk was with you to indicate that we were running short on time. I will give you a few more seconds to close.

Mr McGlone: Thank you. By short-changing the new councils now, the Executive are pressurising them into taking shortcuts with their delivery in the future. Equality will be a forgotten aspiration. The cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, if it ever appears, will be dead in the water.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr McGlone: It is in the interest of the Executive and the parties, as well as in the self-interest of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to prevent that from happening.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Before starting, may we just reflect on the fact that there was a further fatality on the roads in the past short while? It was a 19-year-old man, and we extend condolences to his family.

I say to Lord Morrow, and to anyone who has any doubts, that I am very much an advocate for reform. I believe that this part of the world needs a new phase of deep reform. I also believe that reforms over the past 40 years have served our part of Ireland well across the range of areas of the public sector that demanded them, even though some people have resisted them. I think that we live with the benefits of all that. I believe in council reform, because, although I do not agree with the Executive's decision on 11 councils, I accept that it is the Executive's decision.

I challenge anybody to credibly and in any material way demonstrate that, since that decision was taken, I have in any way tried to proceed at "a snail's pace", as Lord Morrow and others suggested. If you went to any NILGA or NIC conference or to any meeting of any voluntary transition committee or the regional transition committees — I can tell you that there have been an awful lot of those meetings — you would know that I have told people repeatedly that the point of no return passed long ago and that we are going to get this

reform done, and, crucially, touching on a theme a lot of Members raised, to get it done right.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will certainly give way to everybody. I do not have a problem giving way. We need to get it done right. That is what the debate is about; to help to get it done right. I will give way to Mr Wells first.

Mr Wells: The Minister said he is going to get it done right, but is he going to get it done on time? He did not mention any chronology.

Mr Attwood: Let me confirm, then; to get it done on time and to get it done right. That is how I will judge myself. No message has come from me at any of those gatherings over the past period to suggest to anybody anything other than, whatever my reservations about elements of reform, I do not dispute reform and I will manage 15 councils and try to get the reform done as best as I possibly can, on time and done right.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

That is why at all those gatherings, I give the councils a countdown. At the most recent gathering in Dungannon, and Lord Morrow, you should check this with your colleagues, I again sent out the message that I just outlined. I confirmed that we have 800 days, to go back to Mr Wells' point, to get this done and to get this done right.

Lord Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way to Mr Agnew first.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that we would be much further along the road had it not been for former Minister Poots protecting his own little patch?

Mr Attwood: If there is doubt among some of those in councils at this time, they will have doubt because they will have seen the delay and doubt that heretofore informed this particular reform process. However, there has been no doubt from the approach that I am taking.

When it comes to the issue of funding, which is what this debate is primarily about, although I will touch upon a lot of other issues, I have not been saying to any council at any time or in any way that all the costs would fall to councils. That may have been the Executive decision, and I am trying to rework that Executive decision in the terms that some people have outlined. Reformed funding will come from a family of measures. What are those measures? I keep challenging councils to accelerate their work on ICE sharing and collaboration, where there are some moderate and good examples of how councils, whether it is in stationery, the provision of vehicles, the purchase of items, and even in electricity tender, buy into a framework established by Newry and Mourne District Council. I have said that ICE needs to be accelerated to see in the next 800 days what sharing and collaboration can produce in respect of funds in order to contribute to the family of funding of local council reform.

I have said to them that if there are margins, and reserves, and I think there will be, let us use them for the family of funding of RPA reform. I have said that there will be some sympathy, if not support, around the Executive table when it comes to soft loans. On the transitional and transformative costs that will fall to councils, some of which will be substantial, the Executive may eventually be minded to support soft loans whereby they might pay the interest on those loans. I have said to councils that there is even greater support around the Executive table for the principle of rates convergence. I have not denied any of that in my conversations with councils, and I have challenged them to look into their own structures to identify where they can contribute.

However, I have also said to them, as I have said to my Executive colleagues since last June, that in a number of bids that have been referred to during the course of this debate and in the paper that I circulated last autumn, which was tabled at the Executive meeting last Thursday, the burden of the cost of reform, in my view, has to be shared by the Executive. The way I have tried to work that, mindful of the previous Executive decision that there would be no Executive funding, is to say that there are streams of funding that are not cash-releasing in the future and, therefore, do not bring particular benefit from cash savings to the council on the far side of 2015. I have said I believe that there are five or six elements of reform that can be supported in that way.

What are those costs? Mr Hamilton said that the figures need to be interrogated and that there should be an accurate assessment of the

truth of it. I am surprised that Mr Hamilton made that argument given that he is the purported next Minister of Finance and Personnel, and given, no doubt, his close working relationship with the current Minister of Finance and Personnel. In fact, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Wilson, came to this Chamber last week — he has yet to come back to it to correct the record — and said that my estimate as part of my bid to the Executive for a funding package for severance costs meant that every councillor would take severance. I have not said this publicly, but Mrs Kelly says that figure is around £38.5 million. Mr Hamilton says that there has to be an accurate assessment of those costs. He should have a conversation with his ministerial colleague who said that every councillor will take severance under my bid. How ludicrous a claim is that?

The figures have been interrogated, and my bid says that only 266 councillors are entitled to severance under the scheme that I am proposing. Why? Because those who have served up to 12 years are not entitled to severance at all and, consequently, the majority of councillors are disqualified from severance. Furthermore, our estimate is that, of the 266 councillors who might be entitled to severance, 75% might take it. That is the accurate assessment, and those are the true figures. That is why, Mr Boylan, what I have put forward to the Executive and to the Finance Minister is robust, unlike the analysis and the claims of others that those figures are not robust.

When it comes to severance, I am saying that we in this Chamber and the Executive should respect all those who served this part of the world well, particularly during the years of terror and state violence. We have an ethical commitment and a political obligation to show generosity, as far as we can without creating public disquiet, and to say to those people that we recognise their public service within the principles of democracy, their stand against terror and state violence and their leading of the council chambers and that we, in this Chamber, will fully back the severance scheme of £3.5 million.

I will not go through all the other elements of my bid, but I will take up the point made by Mr Wells, who speaks with great authority on planning matters. He said that — these are his words; I do not choose them — councillors were not adequately equipped or trained for the planning function and have not got the maturity for it. In my bid to the Executive, I have asked for substantial moneys. Why? To build up the training and capacity needs of councillors and

senior managers in the period until transition, particularly in respect of the planning function.

If you speak to the Minister with responsibility for planning in Scotland, John Swinney, who I always say is the best Minister in these islands because he knows best the difference between being in government and being in power, he will tell you that, in the transfer of planning function to the councils in Scotland, some measured up to the responsibility of being the planning authority and others did not. When Belfast City Council went on a training seminar to Scotland in December, it went to Dundee. Why? Because Dundee and Fife are two councils that have measured up best to the requirements and challenges of being a planning authority. If we are to get RPA right, we have to get the transfer of planning right. In getting the transfer of planning right, we not only have, to go back to Mr Elliott's point, to ensure that it is funded such that it is fully fit for purpose and that the architecture of planning is fully fit for purpose — that is why I was here last week to debate the Planning Bill — but we have to ensure that those who will fulfil the planning function, be it on applications, on local development plans or on community planning, are fit for purpose.

Mr Wells may have made a good point that there are risks with governance, accountability and in ensuring that ethics and equality prevail in council functions in the future, not least in planning. That point was touched on by Mr McGlone. There is a risk, and to mitigate that risk you train and build capacity; to train and build capacity, you need to fund; and to fund, the Executive have to revisit their principle of not funding RPA and fund those streams of funding that I spoke about.

One of the most muddled speeches came from Ms Lo. Ms Lo said that we were overcomplicating the process of reform, yet in the very next sentence she said that the process was "very complex". You cannot have it both ways. Given that it is a complex process, you need to buy in the ownership of councillors and senior managers to that process. That is why we have the structures that I am talking about. It was also muddled because —

5.00 pm

Ms Lo: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. It was also muddled because she claimed that a commissioner had not been appointed to take forward the decision of the Chamber last

summer on boundaries. Responsibility for that passed from me and from the Executive to the Secretary of State and the London Government last July. If you have a problem with the fact that someone was not appointed, take it up with the Secretary of State. She will tell you that, late though it may be in my view, she did appoint someone. Clearly, Ms Lo has forgotten that.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister agree that there has been a series of slippages in the programme? That is what is causing the frustration and uncertainty in all the local councils.

Mr Attwood: There are many councils in the North that have applied themselves diligently to the task of RPA since the council decision was made. Do not portray all councils in the way that you choose to. Yes, some are not running at the speed of others, but there are examples of those that are pushing on with reform, even though they may have some resistance to some of the details of it. If we get the funding right when we bring the functions paper through the Executive in the next week or two and if we get the reorganisation Bill to the Chamber in February, as I have ambitions to do, and so on and so forth, even those who hide behind such excuses will not be able to do so.

Finally, last week in the Chamber, the Minister of Finance and Personnel confirmed that no funding was given for a decay and dereliction bid from me and the councils. A week after he announced that to the Executive, he changed his mind. I hope that, next week, he will change his mind on my Executive bid for RPA transitional costs.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. I hasten to add that North Down Borough Council is the only council that I have been on. I am not like the nomad to my right: the Lawrence of Arabia of the Assembly, Mr Wells. It seems the boundaries are changed every time you try to exclude him. I hope that he is not getting a particular message out of that.

That is the significance. In this debate, I am representing the ratepayer and the taxpayer. It may come as a surprise to some, but they are one and the same person. We have to get away from the fictional economics that writing out a cheque on behalf of the Executive to local government is, in some way, a cost-free option. Mr Hussey referred to the ratepayers of Fermanagh and Omagh. If, for example, as part of this, the Executive were to write a cheque for £40 million, that is £40 million that is

effectively coming out of the block grant. It is not additional money; it is money that then cannot be spent on other services such as education and a range of other things.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I do not —

Mr Hussey: I did not think that you would.

Mr Weir: With respect, I have only five minutes to wind up on the entire debate. Perhaps it might be better if you read my remarks later. You might learn something.

The Member seems to want RPA scuppered entirely, that there is not a call for this and that we should remain with a hermetically sealed 26 councils. I remind the Member that the initiative for this came from an Ulster Unionist Minister, Mr Sam Foster, who announced it not in this Chamber but at an Ulster Unionist conference. His proposals did not include the retention of 26 councils. So perhaps he needs to take that up with his Fermanagh colleague. I also indicate, in relation to that, that the proposals at that stage contained options for seven, 11 or 15 councils.

We got from Patsy McGlone a lecture such as we often get from the lectern. I do not know whether it will be him or Mrs Kelly who will replace Minister Attwood, on the grounds of equality. He mentioned Red Sky; I am not sure what that has to do with local government. He mentioned Girdwood, and the local SDLP representative had no problem having his photograph taken at the time. Strangely, when talking about equality — equality is at the heart of RPA — there was no mention of McCreesh Park and the role of the SDLP and its members on the ground in supporting the naming of that park. So I have to say that, if we are to get lectures on equality, perhaps the physician could heal himself before he lectures the Chamber.

I have to say that Mr Boylan's speech did not entirely convince me. He mentioned his concern that we are only concentrating on rates convergence. However, it is clear that the motion talks about financing reform and, in particular, rates convergence. So therefore rates convergence is only a subset. I think that there is widespread agreement around the Chamber that rates convergence needs to be dealt with.

I commend Mr Elliott, who made reference to another issue. There has been so much focus

on the short-term cost side of this that there is a danger that we take our eye off the ball with respect to the longer-term financing. Getting that rebalancing right between local government and regional rates is something that needs to be tackled. Mention was made of meeting upfront costs through soft loans. That is something that, I think, all of us can embrace, something that there would not be a problem with. Once you take into account and accept that there is a need for convergence, it comes down to the issue of hollowing out which upfront costs cannot be met immediately — or at all — by local government, some of them with relation to savings.

There are flawed assumptions in what the Minister has said. For example, he mentioned an assumption that 75% of eligible councillors will take a redundancy package. I believe that that is a gross exaggeration. Similarly, as I understand it, the funding package has made an assumption that new people on shadow councils will represent about 75% of the total. Again, I think that that is fundamentally wrong. There is a disingenuous quality in the talk about monitoring rounds. Monitoring rounds are meant to be spent in-year but, as we saw presented to the Environment Committee, some of the Minister's bids were for things that clearly went beyond the year in question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Weir: There is a need for sensible discussion and for the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Finance to have that realistic conversation and to bring this forward as something that does not burden the ratepayer or the taxpayer. We have to realise that they are the same person, and that is the good sense in our amendment.

Mr Eastwood: I was elected to Derry City Council in 2005 and served until just after I was elected to this place in 2011. Being a councillor is not an easy job; sometimes it is a thankless task. However, those years were much easier years to be a councillor in the North of Ireland than the years previously. Many people in the House served through very difficult times and put not only their family life but their life itself on the line. It is important that, when we discuss these things, we remember all the people, those who are with us and those no longer with us, who served with distinction across this part of the world, serving our communities. Whatever we do as a result of RPA, we need to ensure that they are always at the forefront of our minds and are not left behind when it

comes to funding severance pay or anything else.

I will go through some of the remarks that were made, and I apologise to anyone whose remarks I do not touch on. Mrs Kelly began by stating the fact that the Minister came to the Executive a number of times, during a number of monitoring rounds, hoping and asking that the Executive would support his bid to ensure that RPA is properly funded. I do not think that he ever once said that the House or the Executive should fund all the costs of RPA. However, I think he said that it was important that we all shared the burden. He made it clear that councils had some of that burden to share themselves. If we are going to ask councils to take part in this huge upheaval and huge reform, it is essential that we help them to get over the line.

Mrs Kelly talked clearly about the real costs involved in the change: the cost of changing the IT systems; the cost of transition; the severance costs; and the potential new headquarters that will be built. She also talked about the potential savings through the ICE scheme and the fact that, when a lot of the councils merge, we will have fewer chief executives and fewer senior executives. Hopefully, that will help to bring about some of the savings that people are looking for.

Mrs Kelly and other Members talked about the need for equality and good relations to be at the core of everything that we do in RPA. I come from Derry, and we know all about the need for equality and good relations when it comes to councils, a place that was left behind and gerrymandered and where discrimination was the order of the day until the civil rights movement made sure that that would no longer happen. One thing is important: when Derry City Council changed and became Derry City Council, people in that council made sure that it would never happen again the other way round. We have a great system of ensuring that there is cross-community allocation of the mayor's position, the chairpersons' positions and every position in Derry City Council. I hope that that is the standard that RPA will meet when we look at all the councils around the North, even, Mr Weir, with regard to issues that happened in Newry and Mourne District Council. If things have happened that should not have happened, we should all accept that. We should accept that right across the councils that we all serve on and ensure that good relations and equality are the cornerstone and core of everything that we do, no matter who is in charge of the council.

Mr Hamilton said that, when powers are transferred, councils will need to be properly resourced. I agree with him on that, and most people in the House would agree with him. The fact is that we need to play our part in ensuring that that is the case, and I hope that we can.

Mr Boylan agreed that there was a need for a package. He also talked about the need for the continued involvement of local councils in working all those issues out, and I do not think that there is any argument there. Mr Elliott talked about the need for the transfer of functions to be cost-neutral.

Ms Lo said a number of things, but I am not sure what they all meant. She talked about the need for staff morale to be boosted and the fact that council staff in certain parts — I think that she said everywhere — were having real difficulty with morale. I have to be honest: that is not my experience. In any council experience that I have had, the staff were very good. They are top-class. They work right across the board to ensure a proper and quality service for the people of our community. I do not think that it is fair or sensible or very mature to say that staff morale is very low. I do not think that that is the case, and, if we can work together —

Ms Lo: I thank the Member for giving way. I did not say that there is low morale. I asked how it was going to impact on people's morale. I am not saying that there is poor morale.

Mr Eastwood: OK. I must have misheard the Committee Chair.

The best thing to do to ensure that staff morale is high is to get the issue sorted out and get it sorted out quickly. The Minister has come forward with bids. Most Members in the House support our motion. Let us get it sorted out. Let the Finance Minister and the whole Executive support the need for support for local councils in RPA.

Lord Morrow talked about RPA moving at a snail's pace. I have to be honest: a sort of amnesia creeps into this place. Does Lord Morrow not remember the previous Ministers who were in charge of this process, or has RPA just happened all of a sudden? I do not remember when RPA was first mooted, but it was not in the past 18 months. There has been more —

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: Gladly.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. That is a bit rich coming from an individual who claims to be a member of the Environment Committee that debates these issues. Maybe he would like to tell the Assembly today how many of those meetings he turned up for.

5.15 pm

Mr Eastwood: Mr Deputy Speaker, as an Assembly Private Secretary to the Minister, I will not —

Lord Morrow: Tell us.

Mr Eastwood: Let me speak, Lord Morrow. Thank you very much. I am not the type of Member who will allow any conflict of interest in anything I do in the House. It is very rich to hear him, a member of three Chambers, coming here and talking about — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Eastwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been thrown off my remarks.

Mr Molloy said that it would have been better had a lot of the councils been working together before now and that, if they had, we would not have some of the problems that we have. I agree with him, but there are many good examples of councils working together to deliver on RPA. That is the essence of it. This is not something that needs to be handed down from the Executive or the House; this needs to happen, and everybody has to put their shoulder to the wheel to ensure that RPA is delivered.

Mr Wells talked about the fact that he has been a member of three councils. He has been transitioned from one council to the next. Maybe, if we get our way, we will be able to transition him somewhere else after this. He talked about the need for urgency and for clarification from the Minister. I do not know how many times Members need to hear it: we did not support the particular model put forward by the Executive, but the Minister has said a number of times — countless times, and I have been sitting beside him when he has said it — that he is committed to delivering on the RPA project and to delivering it in the time that is set out. That is why he brought forward a Planning Bill only last week, and that is why he is ensuring that the planning changes will be implemented before the transfer of functions. I think that he said it again today. I do not know why Members need to keep asking the question

and muddying the waters. The Minister is committed to delivering on this project. He has said that countless times, and he said it again today. Hopefully, that will suffice for Mr Wells.

I will end with that. This is one of the biggest reforms that we face. The Minister is a reforming Minister. Whatever about the sniggers from other Benches, it would have been far better if the previous Ministers had shown the same commitment to delivering RPA, even if they did not agree with it, in time for 2015. The fact is that we are where we are; this will be delivered. If Members on the other Benches would encourage their Ministers to come to the table to ensure that we can deliver on RPA and that we can actually afford it, that would —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Eastwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 36; Noes 52.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hilditch and Mr G Robinson

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt,

Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mrs McKeivitt

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the significant workload and substantial costs involved in the delivery of the Executive's local government reform transition as proposed under the review of public administration; believes that the Executive should provide financial support for the reform process, including for future rates convergence; and calls on the Executive to provide financial support to councils to cover the upfront costs of RPA, which yield no short-term savings, and to ensure that these costs do not result in rate increases.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.



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